FLAT NARRATOLOGY: SURFACE, DEPTH, AND SPECULATION IN CONTEMPORARY METAFICTION

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This dissertation argues that contemporary metafictions such as Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye* (1988), Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001), and Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* (2001) make elements of their narrative discourse (the language in which they are told) into important elements of their stories (the events about which they tell). Metafictions – fictions that formally or explicitly comment on the manner of their own telling – have almost always been read for the philosophical content of their self-reflexivity, some undermining readers' epistemological certainty, others challenging readers' assumptions about their own and the fictions' ontological status. I argue, however that these contemporary novels use their self-commentary to underscore the materiality and agency of language in storytelling, in experiences of loss, and in quests for personal agency in a world where discourse often floats free of attribution.

In emphasizing the agency of discourse, my readings of *Cat's Eye*, *John Henry Days*, and *The Body Artist* also contribute to contemporary debates about literary-critical methodology. Each reading investigates the labor of producing and trying to sustain the critical distinctions between description and interpretation, and between story and discourse, in the face of textual objects' manifestly hybrid natures. I develop a "flat narratology," itself a hybrid descriptive-interpretive critical practice, which draws on the methods of narrative poetics and works to reconcile them with insights from science studies about the production of critical and empirical knowledge. My method

shares attention among small units of discourse like sentences and phrases; conventional textual objects like the "existents" of a story-world (characters, settings, events); and also objects like *Cat's Eye*'s frameworks for viewing that are not given by the conventional vocabulary of narrative poetics. I argue that narratives are neither only the utterances of their authors (real or implied) nor only arrays of words to which the reader or critic brings all the narrative and signifying force. They are, rather, a set of unusual real-world objects that, without being alive, nonetheless speak about themselves.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Ezra Dan Feldman grew up in Cambridge, MA, and received his A.B. in English from Harvard College in 2002 and his M.F.A. in poetry from Cornell University in 2007. His collection of poems, *Habitat of Stones*, was selected by Mark Irwin for the Patricia Bibby First Book Award and published by Tebot Bach.

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Introduction – Problems and Meta-Problems in Literary Critical Practice

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This has been the year of "alternative facts" – assertions and statistics, insinuations and narratives whose sources are hidden behind online personae or lost in long transactional chains of social-media (or intelligence-service) sharing. As the source of a story, whether person, "bot," or institution, recedes from the locus and moment of its reception, it becomes more and more difficult to authenticate or validate whatever is transmitted or shared, and audiences across the political spectrum today encounter unbelievable and all-too-perfectly believable accounts of what their ideological adversaries have done or mean to do. It has become difficult for many to know what to believe. Perhaps coincidentally, this last year also saw the publication of Michelle Tea's *Black Wave* (2016), a novel that presents as a memoir that in turn confesses its own fictionality – just before proceeding to narrate the end of the world. Ostensibly, then, the book both tells the future and prepares a story for after the end. It posits its own language persisting in an unpeopled world, and thus it gives narrative form to the feeling of discourse overwhelming reality, of a multiplicity of unauthenticated stories taking the place of actual events.

The notion of an unbelievable present, or a present that feels, to some observer, like a speculative fiction, has literary precedent. For example, "Borges and I" (1960) briefly and brilliantly articulates the puzzlement of someone who cannot quite persuade himself of his own agency and who feels, as a consequence, the unreality of his experience. The first-person narrator begins by declaring, "The other one, the one called Borges, is the one things happen to" (Borges 324). In so doing, this narrator

distinguishes his own space from the one in which "things happen," and it is obvious that he feels the evanescence of the former: "my life is a flight," he says, "and I lose everything and everything belongs to oblivion, or to him" (*ibid.*). While describing his own activities and predilections, the narrator also acknowledges his dependence on Borges. He concludes with an epistemological puzzle, a gesture of uncertainty: "I do not know which of us has written this page" (*ibid*.).

Tea's *Black Wave* differs from "Borges and I" in imagining the continuation, rather than the cessation, of the discourse that constitutes the story, and such differences exemplify the distance between modernist and contemporary metafictions. In the context of our present, collective crisis over how to handle the inextricability of the purely fictitious from the possibly real, this dissertation argues that both contemporary literary theory and contemporary metafictions – fictions that formally or explicitly comment on the manner of their own telling – offer rich resources for grappling with the unmoored narratives of our cultural and political lives. Fictional self-referentiality and self-examination are neither merely circular nor disengaged from public life. Rather, metafictions of the last several decades, such as Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*, and Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* afford insights into the materiality of story, experiences of loss, and quests for personal agency amid a deluge of public and collective cultural content.

But isn't the field of literary criticism, like the humanities more broadly, in crisis? When notions of authentication are so suspect that major daily newspapers are routinely distrusted, is it likely that a discipline itself riven by methodological disputes and differences of priority can help? Since the rise of Derridean deconstruction in the

U.S. academy, it has not been too shocking to claim that there is no outside the text (*il n'ya pas d'hors-texte*), that our social and communicative lives are lived within a system of signification that has neither a central point of origin nor an outer boundary – and that therefore is never simply *given* (Derrida 158). This embrace of world-as-text by the academy, and by American culture more broadly, meant that critics, artists, activists, and pundits all learned to talk about flesh-and-blood people (and real, material systems) as constructed, linguistic, and subject to interpretive reframing in the manner of, for example, fictional characters. No doubt there are scholars and novelists, policy-makers and private citizens who blame the "alternative facts" crisis on a relativist academy's inability to combat cynical and poisonous strains of political discourse. Even years before the surprise election of Donald Trump to the United States Presidency, there was an identifiable impulse in several branches of the academy to return descriptions of complex systems, even systems of signification, to a realist or empirical foundation. In other words, the world-as-text way of thinking was falling out of favor with academics who sought to reaffirm both the reality of their objects of study and their capacity and authority to say things about them.

The resulting debate, at least within literary studies, has taken shape in the pages of academic journals in the last decade, including two special issues *Representations* ("The Way We Read Now," 2009, and "Building a Better Description," 2016), and through books like *Criticism After Critique*, edited by Jeffrey Di Leo (2014), Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015), and Elizabeth Anker's and Felski's co-edited collection of essays, *Critique and Postcritique* (2017). To the extent, however, that it has pitted opponents of "the hermeneutics of suspicion" against the

defenders of Marxist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructionist readings, the debate's roots go back at least to Paul Ricoeur's coining of that phrase in 1970 and can also be traced through Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's suggestion that "reparative reading" might present a less agonistic mode of critical engagement with the literary than efforts to decode texts by revealing what they don't, won't, or can't say.

Rather than merely summarizing these debates here, I want examine why critics have turned to science studies (especially via Bruno Latour) and, less frequently, to speculative realist philosophy (via Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, and Ian Bogost) in their efforts to make literary studies more empirical. Other fields might have provided this empirical grounding: cognitive science, for example, has been influential for some narrative theorists,[1] and narrative theory more generally has striven to provide a science of narrative. Why, then, has this subdiscipline not been better represented in the debates over how we read now or in accounts of contemporary literary-descriptive practice? What ways of thinking and reading do the transdisciplinary borrowings from science studies afford, that literature's own long tradition of narrative poetics does not? And how might narrative theory respond to or incorporate these new descriptive practices, which are oriented as much (or more) toward the meta-critical project of describing description as toward cataloging and testing literary forms themselves?

It may be in part that narrative poetics, and poetics more generally, sidelined themselves in the method wars by their own long-standing efforts to separate what they do from hermeneutics. In "Semiotics as a Theory of Reading," for example,

[1] See, for example, David Herman's work, including *Storytelling and the Sciences of Mind* (2013).

Jonathan Culler argues that the kind of knowledge literary studies is best suited to produce is not knowledge of what particular texts mean, but of "how it is that literary works have the meaning they do for readers" (*Pursuit* 52). This is because people disagree, sometimes vehemently, about what a text means; and because efforts to secure the meaning of a given text only lead, typically, to the proliferation of different, competing interpretations (*ibid*.). Hence,

> [i]nstead of attempting to legislate solutions to interpretive disagreements, one might attempt to analyze the interpretive operations that produce these disagreements […]. Such a program falls under the aegis of semiotics, which seeks to identify the conventions and operations by which any signifying practice (such as literature) produces its observable effects of meaning. (*ibid*.)

In other words, semiotics or poetics (Culler's equivalence) is not and should not be in the business of deciding among interpretive strategies. Interpretations (and other readerly responses) are the "observable effects of meaning" – not, themselves, knowledge – and only investigating the operations by which meaning is made might yield knowledge in the end. As recently as his 2001 preface to the Routledge Classic edition of *The Pursuit of Signs*, Culler reflects that the role of poetics in literary studies remains minor: "Critics are more interested in interpreting novels than in trying to spell out how we go about understanding them as we read"; "[i]nterpretation still reigns" (xvii). Since the method wars are explicitly about how critics *should* go about their interpretive business, rather than about how they *do*, it may come as little surprise that poetics has not been a part of them. Poetics does not aim to provide an evaluative framework for hermeneutics.

And yet, while the present crisis over how to read has been prompted by critique's apparent political shortcomings (rehearsed with rhetorical brio by Bruno Latour in "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern"), some of the most fascinating rejections of the hermeneutics of suspicion have, strangely enough, brought renewed attention to description. Since describing literary worlds – their possibilities, their structures, their contents; their genres and their governing rules (if any) – has been so large a part of the business of narrative theory, it is not obvious why new accounts of description haven't treated this tradition of analysis (from Russian formalism, French structuralism, and more recent American, German, and Israeli narratology) as an intellectual resource.

My suspicion, if I may put it that way, is that narratology and narrative poetics have been too successful in arguing for the distinction between description and interpretation. Critics like Sharon Marcus, Heather Love, and Stephen Best (and those critics whose work they collect in "Building a Better Description") may be dissuaded from grounding their descriptive practices in semiotics or poetics just because such description purports to be *about* meaning making, but not part of it. Put another way, if poetics does not offer descriptions of texts themselves, but only descriptions of their meanings and how people make those meanings, then poetics doesn't seem to be solving the problem that current advocates of description are facing, namely what kind of objects interpretation is given to work with.

Best and Marcus's "Surface Reading: An Introduction" shows, via its list of six different conceptions of textual "surface," just how little agreement there is over what counts as a textual given, even among critics who share the outlook that the discipline

must progress, somehow, beyond the "hermeneutics of suspicion."[2] In casting so wide a net, Best and Marcus are constrained in the kinds of conclusions they can draw, and rather than delineating their own ontology of textual surface, they wind up their introduction to "The Way We Read Now" by addressing the concern that "[s]urface reading, which strives to describe texts accurately, might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are" (16). Although they defend against this critique by characterizing the goals of "immersion in texts" and "attentiveness," as "a kind of freedom," they have not only left the ontological question ("What are the givens of literary analysis?") unanswered, they have even, in a way, put the cart before the horse, since after describing surface reading's "striving" to describe in one clause, they shift very quickly to the idea that "things as they are" are readily apparent, to be accepted or not (*ibid*.). The appeal to descriptive practices as somehow liberating and potentially political suggest another reason for the sidelining of narrative poetics in the method wars, namely that the kind of empiricism that seems to be needed now is not neutral, but political; and it sheds light on the second question I posed above, "What ways of thinking and reading do borrowings from science studies and speculative realist philosophy afford, that narrative poetics does not?"

Whereas narrative poetics has presented its empiricism in neutral terms, the social sciences arguably embrace description as part of their critical practices, rather than holding it apart as either pre- or meta-critical. Heather Love has articulated the relationship between literary studies and social science in terms of how they fit

[2] I address two of these conceptions, "Attention to surface as a practice of critical description" and "Surface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts," in some detail in Chapter 2.

description into their interpretive schema: In "Close Reading and Thin Description" (2013), Love suggests that literary scholars since the 1970s have mostly discounted the importance of a first layer of description, "thin" rather than "thick," in their embrace of Clifford Geertz's "insistence on interpretation against observation" in social science (409). Love argues that Geertz understood the necessity of building interpretation atop observation, even as he recognized that ethnography could never be "a matter of mere recording" (408). Rather, "[c]ritiquing the concept of objectivity, and pointing to the cultural work that goes into even the slightest gesture, Geertz argues that the simplest 'recording' of behavior depends on interpretive protocols and the subjective analyses of the observer" (*ibid*.).

Geertz's critique of "objectivity" seems like a strange foundation on which to build a more empirical literary analysis, but Love's reading of Geertz's "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture" actually emphasizes Geertz's own fear "that cultural analysis […] will lose touch with the hard surfaces of life" (Geertz 30, qtd. in Love 410). Even though cultural analysis always involves the application of some interpretive frame, in Love's reading of Geertz "ethnographic practice brings the researcher into contact with the hard surfaces of behavior," and this practice might find its literary counterpart in surface reading (410). Love calls surface reading "descriptive" in the sense that "it defers virtuosic interpretation in order to attempt to formulate an accurate account of what the text is *like*" (412).

So far, Love has sought and found in Geertz a model of reading that acknowledges the importance of description, the necessity of interpretation's role in it, and also the necessity of interpretation's somehow coming "into contact with […]

hard surfaces." Poetics apparently has little to add to this account of how description and interpretation relate to one another, especially if poetics doesn't examine how and whether description underpins interpretive practice. Yet neither in "Close Reading and Thin Description" nor, later, in "Description Across the Disciplines" (co-written with Marcus and Best) does Love enumerate the descriptions that might be most helpful in making literary analysis more empirical.[3] The latter provides descriptive practices in the humanities with a preliminary defense as such, but leaves the question of how "to formulate an accurate account of what the text is *like*" very much open.[4] Perhaps this is because Love's goal in "Close Reading and Thin Description" is not, in fact, to settle the ontology of textual objects, but to try to pull the humanities away from the habit of textualizing culture, so that they "also make room for other practices such as description, observation, and natural history, as well as testing, polling, and coding." (430). If I am reading Love correctly, then her expanded account of "reading" actually sets aside the intermingling of interpretation with description that Geertz acknowledged; the thinly descriptive methods she describes, such as microanalysis of recorded behavior, help "to challenge narrow hermeneutic definitions of reading" and "help us reframe reading as a social science, one that along with more traditional social scientific methods can contribute to the project of showing 'what the real world is really like'" (*ibid*.). The world, rather than the text, is the object of Love's analytical

[3] Marcus, Best, and Love seem not to be pushing for anything like the "distant reading" proposed by Franco Moretti, which makes literary history more empirical by including as much data as are available about as many texts as possible. Moretti, Franco. *Distant Reading.* London: Verso, 2013.
[4] In "Close But Not Deep," Love's emphasis is somewhat different than in "Close Reading and Thin Description." The former (and earlier) article focuses on how descriptive close readings might draw on sociological (and other) descriptive methods to identify "the possibility of an alternative ethics, one grounded in documentation and description rather than empathy and witness" (375).

practice, and Love appears to suggest setting aside hermeneutics itself, not just the hermeneutics of suspicion, in her effort to put the humanities onto an empirical footing.

Although Love's reading of Geertz might further a project of integrating description with interpretation, Love orients her argument in a different direction. Her call to "reframe reading" resonates rhetorically with projects to reground interpretation in empiricism, but the empiricism she offers may no longer concern the literary except as a social behavior. I suggest, then, that if Geertz's account of "thick description" was misread by literary critics in the 1970s as an endorsement of their textualizing the world, Love's "detextualizing" return to "thin description" may not carry us as far as we'd like toward the fundamental conundrum in literary studies about what counts as given (Love 430). In Marxist, psychoanalytic, and deconstructionist readings of literary texts, what's given is an economic, psychic, or semiotic system, the study and application of which is necessary to decode texts. Produced by and inscribed within these systems, the claim goes, texts can never say what they mean. For formalists, similarly, texts are to a certain extent "mute," as Fredric Bogel illustrates in *New Formalist Criticism: Theory and Practice*. Even when a poem is constructed specifically to disprove the idea that it cannot speak about itself – even when line 2 comments on line 1 and line 3 comments on the relationship between lines 2 and 1 – line 3 "cannot comment on its *own* relation" to the other lines (28, Bogel's italics). So we are forced to conclude, Bogel writes, that "while a poem may express something about something, we need literary criticism to express something about the poem" (29).

For the surface readers narrowly, however, and for the wider array of critics today whose methods might count as postcritical, there remains something unsatisfying, and perhaps puzzling, about texts' apparent lack of agency in the making of their own meaning, especially when readers may feel, palpably, that texts *do* things to them. As Emily Apter and Elaine Freedgood note in the afterword to "The Way We Read Now," the particularities of texts and their readers and the contingencies of readers' uneven attention to a text's myriad features deserve a place in reading – even professional, critical reading (140). The various styles, methods, and strategies of reading that have arisen in the wake of critique's having supposedly run out of steam largely share the goal of understanding meaning as co-constructed by texts, their readers, and their contexts. A detailed account of this co-construction's mechanics would, of course, be exactly the work of semiotics and poetics as Culler has defined them. In the meantime, however, critics interested in elaborating the social and material contingencies of their own readings while also grounding those readings firmly in texts have adopted approaches to the making of knowledge that owe much to Bruno Latour.

Rita Felski explains some of the appeal of surface reading in Latourian terms, noting that "[w]ithin a Latourian framework, we do not probe below the surface of a text to retrieve disavowed or repressed meanings, nor do we stand back from a text to 'denaturalize' it and expose its social constructedness" ("Latour and Lit." 741). Rather, we might adopt something very like actor-network theory's "leveling of phenomena through their incorporation into networks," in which we accept that phenomena cannot be explained either reductively or holistically, but should be accounted for via the

networked relations of agents of very different kinds and scales (738). Latour's account of a railroad, which he considers neither local nor global, makes a nice example. The railroad

> is local at all points, since you always find sleepers and railroad workers, and you have stations and automatic ticket machines scattered along the way. Yet it is global, since it takes you from Madrid to Berlin or from Brest to Vladivostok. However, it is not universal enough to be able to take you just anywhere. […] There are continuous paths that lead from the local to the global, from the circumstantial to the universal, from the contingent to the necessary, only so long as the branch lines are paid for. (Latour, *WHNBM* 117)

To make sense of a railroad's effects at the local scale, one cannot exclude its manifestations at the global scale, and vice versa. Networks thus violate our expectations (Latour would say our "modern" expectations) that things can be made sense of in static frames of reference, without changing scales. At the same time, Latour reminds us, the "paths that lead" from one scale to another must be "paid for" not only literally, in the case of the railroad, but in the sense that attention must be paid.

On Felski's view, actor-network theory (ANT) shows that "prevailing styles of scholarly analysis often fail to capture the nature of our entanglement with texts" (739). She asks, in turn, whether the leveling of different phenomena and scales can be made to agree with the special modes of attention that critics bring to literature. Ultimately, Felski suggests that if "[i]nstead of engaging in a hermeneutics of suspicion, we conceive of interpretation as a form of mutual making or composing," then Latourian thought may contribute to literary studies, and it is this notion of "mutual making" that I want, for the moment, to stress, because it paves the way for

my examination of metafiction as participating in the critical discourse about its own subject matter and form (741).

When Michelle Tea's protagonist, Michelle, "wracked her brain for successful books with prominent crack smokers" and asks herself, "What made those crack stories work? What made them, um, universal?," it seems clear that the protagonist and author are speaking through the same discourse to interrogate the "universality" and potential of *Black Wave*'s own dynamic plot structure (Tea 139). Of course it's right that *Black Wave*, like any text, "needs to be mediated to readers by intensive critical performance if it is to show forth what it is, does, and means" (Bogel 25). But can't a metafiction provide much of that mediation without falling short, somehow, of self-reflexivity? If formalism doesn't have on hand the language to embed the mediating, "intensive critical performance" within a text, Latour may offer a language for talking about the constructedness of meaning that gives credence to texts' agency in the process.

Latour's accounts of meaning's constructedness are valuable to literary critics because they enable and sustain empirical investigation.[5] When Felski writes that Latour's "Actor-network theory emphasizes both the necessity and the sheer difficulty of description, of attending to an empirical world that often resists or refutes our assumptions," I take it as a provocation to examine how ideas from Latourian social science (and those branches of speculative realism that have drawn substantially on Latour) might impact the most descriptively-oriented field of literary studies: narrative

[5] Deconstruction, of course, also emphasizes and studies the constructedness of meaning, but without the language of empiricism that is so much desired in the humanities today.

poetics (740). I take as my premise that literary-fictional worlds are subspaces of the empirical world we inhabit. But before I turn my attention to the difficulties of describing such worlds in their particular depths and surfaces, their microcosms, mesocosms, and macrocosms, I return to the divide between interpretation and description, to consider by way of a Latourian analogy how that distinction is produced and sustained.

Narrative poetics is founded, I have said, on something like the distinction between interpretation and description. Poetics is taken not to promote the production or revelation of texts' meanings, but rather, to quote Culler again, to investigate "the structures and conventions of literary discourse which enable them to have the meanings they do" ("Foreword" 8). In other words, poetics is about examining the conditions of possibility for textual meaning: the laws or rules – whether natural or conventional, necessary or contingent – that govern signification. In practice, however, the distinction between poetics and interpretation can be difficult to pin down, especially when the work of producing narratological distinctions becomes visible.

In "Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative," Culler deconstructs the narratological division between story and discourse by reading Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*. The story/discourse divide is supposed to be easy to define. Ostensibly, story is *what* is told and discourse is the *way* it is told (Chatman 9). The story is supposed to have some kind of independent existence, such that it could be told in multiple ways, could be summarized, and could be subject to claims about what happened that are answerable in other terms than simply repeating

the discourse. The discourse, however, comprises exactly the linguistic (or other) material in which the story is actually related. Because discourse is supposed to do the work of conveying the story material to the audience, the discourse is supposed to be a *function* of the story. Every element of the discourse must relate to or hang on the story's "existents" or "events" (Chatman), and nothing can be extraneous, because then the discourse would not belong to *this* story.

However, Culler shows in his readings of Sophocles and Eliot how the story can also become a function of the discourse. This is the "logic by which event is a product of discursive forces rather than a given reported by discourse," and it occurs when a structure of signification determines the event (*Pursuit* 195). In Culler's words, "Oedipus becomes the murderer of his father not by a violent act that is brought to light but by bowing to the demands of narrative coherence and deeming the act to have taken place" (194). This appears to indicate a flaw in the narratological approach, however, which seems prepared to recognize discourse as a function of story, but not the other way around. Culler writes: "These two logics, one of which insists upon the causal efficacy of origins and the other of which denies their causal efficacy, are in contradiction but they are essential to the way in which the narrative functions" (198). Both of these logics are necessary to narrative, Culler contends, and "[t]heorists of narrative […] have perhaps been too ready to assume that they can be held together, synthesized in some way without contradiction" (198).

The narratological investment in producing the story as given and the discourse as contingent has a parallel in the investment of poetics in producing description as distinct from interpretation. But clearly it is an interpretation of Sophocles' *Oedipus*

that enables a narratological insight about the production of meaning. In both cases, however foundational the distinction may be for the discipline that produces it, the question of how it was produced typically goes unexamined. And the Latourian analogy that I promised is just this: the work of producing such categories as description and interpretation, poetics and hermeneutics, and story and discourse resembles (has the form of, in Caroline Levine's sense)[6] the "purifying" work of modern, Western science, which belies the hybridity of the objects it describes and assigns them to distinct ontological categories (*WHNBM* 10).

Let me linger on this point and elaborate, since this analogy also gives its form to my readings in this project. Latour argues in *We Have Never Been Modern* that the idea of modernity depends on the clean separation of nature from culture and that the crisis of modernity (the beginning of its end) comes when networks of sciences and technologies have produced so many hybrids or "quasi-objects" that the purifying work of delimiting objects as either natural or cultural breaks down.[7] The trick of Latour's reading, however, is that modernity is characterized also by a second kind of work, translation, that it commits to hiding from itself. Translation "creates mixtures between entirely new types of beings, hybrids of nature and culture," even as purification "creates two entirely distinct ontological zones: that of human beings on the one hand; that of nonhumans on the other" (*WHNBM* 10-11). Latour explains that the set of practices he calls translation "corresponds to what I have called networks,"

[6] See Chapter 2.
[7] The purification itself is instrumentally important: it facilitates the formulation of "natural law" and hence the technical and epistemological achievements of scientific investigation. The material forms of modernity are thus built upon this "purifying" intellectual work.

while the second set of practices, purification, corresponds to "the modern critical stance" (11). The key, however, is that "as soon as we direct our attention simultaneously to the work of purification and the work of hybridization, we immediately stop being wholly modern, and our future begins to change" (*ibid*.).

Even without buying the whole of Latour's argument that modernity's clean critical distinctions always depended upon practices that it denied, and that hence, "we have never been modern," we can see the power of his idea that even supposedly ontological distinctions can depend structurally on hidden labor that works with and sorts through nuance, complexity, and networks of disparate objects, ideas, and practices. To make this concrete on the front end of my analogy, Culler's readings of *Oedipus* and *Daniel Deronda* are "translational" in Latour's terms, since they combine narratological description with interpretation in order to produce a "pure" narratological (rather than interpretive) account of the relations between story and discourse in the two texts.[8] Similarly, interpretive methodologies that aspire to direct contact with textual surface and invest in description may be doing a kind of work that interpretation itself cannot, or cannot yet, recognize. This is one way of accounting for how adamant critiques of critique can be, and also for how defenders of hermeneutics dig in. (In Chapter 2 I compare Ellen Rooney's "Symptomatic Reading is a Problem of Form" with the formalism of Caroline Levine in an effort to show both critics' investment in the form/content divide, another of these ontological distinctions that is

[8] Culler's narratological summation is that "[s]ince the distinction between story and discourse can function only if there is a determination of one by the other, the analyst must always choose which will be treated as the given and which as the product. Yet either choice leads to a narratology that misses some of the curious complexity of narratives and fails to account for much of their impact" (*Pursuit* 208).

produced by work that is difficult to account for.)

But what is the material, what are the hybrid forms, the quasi-objects of this analogy? What is being *produced* that fills the intermediary space between description and interpretation? In brief: contemporary critical writing, including metafiction.

To clarify, let me sum up and pull together the disparate threads and theoretical investigations that I have so far outlined:

(1) Today, in the real world, discourse is more difficult than ever to authenticate. This is not unrelated to new technologies that let us share words and images anonymously, network widely, and circulate views among the likeminded; but neither is it disconnected from the twin crises of critical suspicion ("Nothing means what it says.") and critique's implosion ("Every critical statement or position can be undermined by critical tools we all know well how to deploy.").

(2) Many literary critics and theorists, to ameliorate these crises, have turned to science studies and speculative realist philosophy for an empiricism that also makes room for interpretation (unlike, perhaps, the STEM fields). They have not, in general, had recourse to literary studies' own empirical and descriptive traditions (poetics), in part because poetics has advertised its difference from interpretation, but also because other disciplines have more fully developed language for talking about the co-construction of knowledge by persons, their tools, and their objects of inquiry.

(3) Contemporary methodological debates continue to rely on ontological distinctions whose validity they are already, in practice, undermining, most

> importantly those between description and interpretation, between form and content, and between discourse and story. This is analogous to the "purifying" work that Latour describes as producing the realms of culture (the human) and nature (the nonhuman) as ontologically distinct, but it is work that is already being overwhelmed by the proliferation of hybrid practices and hybrid objects whose ontologies will not permit their assignment to unmixed categories.

My question, finally, is, What if the borrowing by so many cutting-edge literary theorists from Latourian social science and fields like speculative realist philosophy is less about empiricism than about the possibility of recognizing new forms of literary labor: descriptive-interpretive practices, *readings*, that in turn may offer new conceptions of literary form itself?

Possibly, the adoption of Latourian empiricism was supposed to enable practical distinctions between description and interpretation in the literary domain. But, a bit perversely, Latour's actor-network theory and his analysis of modernity's cultural and scientific functions provide an analogy that makes visible the critical energies that have been put into producing and sustaining the ontological divide between description and interpretation. Once one thinks to look for the hybrid objects that might persist despite the work of critical purification, one can read contemporary metafictions as assemblages of texts and worlds whose interpretation and description cannot be distinguished readily (or at all), since they are composed of the very same discourse.

Take for example the contemporary avant-garde novel *S*, by Doug Dorst, which comes in a slipcase containing the book (a bound codex) and an additional

twenty-two items including letters, postcards, telegrams, photographs, and a "decoder wheel" (Figure 1). This collection of items requires not only that any reader make decisions about when to break off reading the narrative text of the codex (itself already interrupted by facsimile handwritten marginal notes), but also that the items' material form be considered as part of the story-world, stuff that the fictional characters supposedly make and handle. The physical form of the novel, which in so

Figure 1

much printed fiction is incidental to both the story and the discourse, in *S* becomes definitely part of both the story-telling mechanism *and* the story-world. Likewise, the novels on which I center this project challenge the already messy (but supposedly pure) division in narrative theory between story and discourse.

If the understanding I have offered of the division between description and interpretation as a kind of purification holds water, then it is presumably incumbent upon us to attend quite carefully to those hybrid objects that are contemporary metafictions. These are texts informed by the theory that critics bring to bear on them; built to thwart assumptions about what is narratively, discursively, and formally given; and, as I hope to show, less "mute" than other literary objects, because they speak simultaneously in various registers, including critical ones. Also – this is essential – it

might be incumbent upon us to bring new forms of attention to bear on such objects, since the point, after all, is to raise questions outside the scheme of description and interpretation that has failed to resolve the field's present crises.

What kinds of reading would new forms of attention produce? Can we decide at what scale to direct our attention, or must it traverse different scales and different ontologies, following the example of what Ian Bogost calls "Latour litanies," networks of causation (or explanation) that concatenate such various objects and agents as "A storm, a rat, a rock, a lion, a child, a worker, a gene, a slave, the unconscious, a virus" (qtd. in Bogost 38). My readings of *Cat's Eye*, *John Henry Days*, and *The Body Artist* are all, at base, narratological, because narrative poetics is the most developed descriptive discourse that is fully at home in literary investigations. They are geared, however, toward investigating the labor of producing and sustaining the ontological distinctions between description and interpretation, and between story and discourse, in the face of textual objects' manifestly hybrid natures.

To distinguish this way of reading from traditional narrative poetics, I use "flat narratology" to name a descriptive-interpretive hybrid practice. While "flatness" appears already among the images of surface and depth in reading, and thinness and thickness in description,[9] I borrow my notion of flatness from speculative realism and Latourian ontology.[10] The point is to share descriptive-interpretive attention among small, contained units of discourse (like sentences and phrases); complex, composite

[9] See Love's "Close but not Deep" for a "flat" reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which Love also calls "reading the novel at the surface" (375).

[10] "Flat ontology" is a term borrowed by Ian Bogost from Levi Bryant and Manuel DeLanda: "An ontology is flat if it makes no distinction between the types of things that exist but treats all equally" (Bogost 17).

objects like the "existents" of the story-world (characters, settings, events); and also, equally, among textual constructs that are not given by the conventional vocabulary of narrative poetics, but are proposed and produced over the course of my readings.

The ambition of this project, then, is to participate in the descriptive-interpretive hybridity of the novels that I analyze and to flatten the hierarchies that have been presumed or given by narrative poetics. I draw on descriptive methodologies from the social sciences that emphasize the mutuality of influence between objects of different natures and different scales, and I apply them to texts that themselves engage in narratologically descriptive work, in order to describe the relation of discourse to story outside of the logic of causality or priority. While flat ontology serves as one model of such reading, this is certainly not because speculative realist or object-oriented philosophy knows any more about textual objects, fictional worlds, and the operations of signification than literary theorists do. It is rather that flat ontologies and Latourian networks offer rubrics for considering the weird agencies of texts; the recirculation of discourse within metafictions; fictions' circulation within our social and economic worlds; narrative discourse's co-production of images, affects, ideas, and stories in our consciousness and culture; and the resilience or resistance of such products in the face of efforts to decode them, explode them, or even explain them away.

In "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam?," after polemically raising the dangers that I rehearsed above, Latour proposes that matters of fact are not the right focus for critical thinking and writing, because all facts, any facts, are easily debunked. Matters of concern, rather, should be taken as the hard and realist

grounding of a "renew[ed] empiricism" (231). Latour lays out the challenge this way: "Can we devise another powerful descriptive tool that deals this time with matters of concern and whose import then will no longer be to debunk but to protect and to care, as Donna Haraway would put it? Is it […] possible to transform the critical urge in the ethos of someone who *adds* reality to matters of fact and not *subtract* reality?" ("Why Has …?" 232 *sic*). Although I speculate that contemporary metafictions are up to something different with self-reflexivity than modernist and postmodernist metafictions, it is not my purpose in this project to define a new, contemporary genre. Rather, I want to explain why recent metafictions prove to be such rich ground for investigating the formal and conceptual questions of how to *read* – even fiction, even metafiction – in a way that adds reality to what is given in description and to what emerges contingently in interpretation.

Defined by its practices of self-commentary, metafiction makes use of self-description and self-reference in the construction of its narrative. Although the language of contemporary metafiction operates at the edges of familiar critical practice, it is also always tinged with the work of *making*, since it cannot help but compose the fictional world or worlds on which it comments. It is my contention that close attention to the descriptive-interpretive practices and performances of metafictions can tell us a great deal about reading closely, about identifying a text's surfaces and depths (if any), and about handling discourse that threatens to come unmoored from its context.

In the chapters that follow, I illustrate how contemporary metafictions can foreground such objects as frameworks, lists, taxonomies and phrases on a par with

character, setting, and event. I argue for the narrative significance of objects that have not been recognized by narrative poetics to date, and I theorize their narrative impetus via "flat narratology," a method for making visible narrative operations that extend from world-building to story-telling to self-reflexive description-interpretation.

The methodological stakes, then, are as follows: I apply to literary texts and worlds Latour's insight that understanding social and technical systems requires accounting for elements of different scales and different natures on equal terms. I also elaborate a method of description that attends to objects unaccounted for in Marcus, Best, and Love's recent work. Finally, I show in a new light what speculative realism and object-oriented ontologies can contribute to narrative analysis: some kinds of literary object are peculiar in that, while clearly nonhuman (though human-made), they speak for themselves (especially when they speak about fictional worlds) and in voices that we might call their own. They are consequently good starting places for thinking about the nonhuman in terms that we can also apply to ourselves. They may also help us to navigate a culture in which the human sources and motives behind public discourse are willfully or contingently obscured.

In interpreting *Cat's Eye*, *John Henry Days*, and *The Body Artist*, as well as describing them, I also briefly suggest that contemporary metafictions should be studied in concert, despite not cohering around any particular thematic content, because they do cohere in putting recursion, circularity, and self-referentiality to work in a new way: In contrast to modernist and postmodernist metafictions, contemporary metafictions acknowledge discourse's real-world force and dramatize the power of

representation to alter what it represents. These are the new stakes of recursion, circularity, and self-referentiality in fictional, critical, and perhaps political discourse.

With a view to examining how contemporary narratives and narrative theory have reimagined the world-to-language relation over the last several decades, and how they might continue to do so amid the present crises in humanistic inquiry, I examine Margaret Atwood's *Cat's Eye*, Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, and Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*.

Chapter 1, "'Nothing Goes Away': *Cat's Eye*'s Frameworks for Viewing as Narrative Poetics," characterizes Atwood's 1988 novel as both realist and experimental. Its peculiar first-person narration makes it easy to reconstruct a plausible biography for the protagonist, Elaine Risley. She is a painter who grows up on the outskirts of Toronto. As an elementary school student, Risley is both socially dependent upon and bullied by Cordelia, Grace, and Carol; and as Risley grows up, the memories of this bullying wax and wane in their salience to her life and art. She becomes close to Cordelia in high school, loses track of her when she moves away from Toronto, but returns to her childhood experiences as subjects for her paintings. The novel's ostensible climax is the opening of Risley's first retrospective show, in Toronto, for which she returns to the city and at which she imagines, again and again, that she might encounter Cordelia for the first time in decades. Cordelia doesn't appear, however, and the novel closes with Risley on a plane back to British Columbia, where she lives.

All along, however, Risley struggles with a problem that she cannot quite name, which is what version of herself corresponds to some external reality or whether any version does. From the unreliability of her memory to her encounter with a graffitied poster of herself (now wearing a mustache (Atwood 20)), the versioning in which she engages generates multiple and incompatible Elaine Risleys – some remembering, some forgetting, some narrating and thinking, others fixed as objects (rather than subjects) of spectacle and speculation. Indeed, the narration returns again and again to a particular framework or geometry for viewing, in which observed and observer are divided by a barrier. When Elaine Risley falls through ice, gazes down from a bridge (possibly at herself, below), looks "down through [time], like water" (3), or paints a painting that is also a memory, she actually relocates herself within this single, paradigmatic scenario. This framing (sometimes quite literal) invites one to set aside the novel's self-contradictory plot and to develop a narrative analysis focused on the hybrid object that is the frame itself.

The narration of *Cat's Eye* privileges the material and metaphorical play of surface and depth over those elements of the novel that have led scholars to consider it a *Künstlerroman*. While it enables the construction of a narrative around Risley's biography, it actually flattens the discursive realm into the visual and vice versa and plays with hybridizing the ontological categories of life and death. *Cat's Eye* is a metafiction bent on investigating its own rendering of surfaces, depths, and whole lives from linguistic material and geometries of spectacle, viewer, and frame. As a consequence, the theories of narrative that the novel offers up for examination sometimes seem less flat than perspectival; but the novel's formal flouting of

biographical time allows its frameworks and spectacles to appear contemporaneously with one another, rather than being ordered or hierarchized by Elaine Risley's personal or artistic development.

While *Cat's Eye* flattens hierarchies of narrative perspective, Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001), which I analyze in Chapter 2, approximates "flat ontology" proper by indulging in indiscriminate, encyclopedic impulses, maximalist prose, digressive story lines, and list-making. The story that appears most often in *John Henry Days* is that of J. Sutter, a New York-based freelance journalist who attends the eponymous festival in Hinton, West Virginia, in his quest to break the record for "the longest bout of junketeering" (Whitehead 110). But the novel juxtaposes sections about J. and his cohort of publicity hacks with vignettes about other persons (some historical and some fictional) including John Henry himself, whom we see at work in the growing Big Bend Tunnel; and Guy Johnson, a sociologist who visits Hinton to sort through the "mountain" of evidence about John Henry's (possible) real-life existence. These and other vignettes are thematically connected to the John Henry legend and ballad, but not narratively integrated with J.'s story or with each other.

The concern of Chapter 2, "Digressive and Taxonomic Narrative in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," is to mobilize the novel in a debate about form's ontology, centered in Ellen Rooney's "Symptomatic Reading is a Problem of Form" and Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. The novel itself poses a series of formal questions about myth, identity, and description and pursues their answers in a mode that repeatedly hinders the novel's plot. I offer a flat

narratological reading of *John Henry Days* that accounts for these hindrances in terms of the novel's competing logics of digression and taxonomy, and I identify those logics with the critical practices of Rooney and Levine, respectively. I read the novel's accounts of excavation and taxonomy as metafictional reflections on critical treatment of literary texts. On their own, both forms of labor exhibit a totalizing impulse that inhibits narrative progress, and *John Henry Days* offers several examples of what I call "the describer's nightmare": characters or readers confront extreme ontologies in which (a) everything is given, (b) what's given cannot be further described or differentiated, or (c) nothing is given at all. After examining each of these scenarios, I zoom out to consider how the novel's open ending suggests a synthesis of its digressive and taxonomic impulses that I label "ontographic" in the spirit of Ian Bogost.

Chapter 3, "'The Hidden Thinness of Everything': Quotation, Performance, and the Tenuousness of Attribution in *The Body Artist*," concerns the temporalities of repeated phrases. *The Body Artist* (2001) is narrated in seven chapters plus unnumbered units that appear between chapters 1 and 2 and between chapters 6 and 7. The chapters' narration generally uses third-person pronouns to refer to the named characters: Lauren Hartke, the artist of the title; Rey Robles, her husband, who commits suicide; Hartke's friend, Mariella Chapman; Robles's first wife, Isabel; and the very strange Mr. Tuttle, who appears in Hartke's house after Robles has killed himself, and whose speech and psychology are the subject of so much speculation by Hartke. The unnumbered units are fictional documents: first an anonymous obituary for Robles and later a review of one of Hartke's performances, written by Chapman.

The narration also uses second-person pronouns in small sections at the starts of chapters 1, 2, 6, and 7.

Phrase, rather than character, setting, or plot, is responsible for *The Body Artist*'s metafictional challenge to the distinction between story and discourse. For example, when Mr. Tuttle or Lauren Hartke or the narrator (re-)introduces the expression, "Don't touch it. I'll clean it up later," the novel conveys the impression that those words come untraceably from elsewhere. The phrases' arrival or appearance becomes the crucial action – not Robles's suicide or Hartke's performance. Thus, the polyphony of this novel's narration, which might only have generated plural perspectives on the narrated events, instead turns language into an agent at both the story level and the discourse level. At the peak of her performance, Hartke herself – already made of nothing but text to the novel's reader – becomes a text within the storyworld, too, read and interpreted by her friend Chapman. *The Body Artist* is about the selection and dissection of discourse: not about character but about quotation.

DeLillo's image of "the hidden thinness of everything," combined with the novel's parceling out of language into quotation, models flat narratology (95). Without pretending to eschew interpretation, it acknowledges the withdrawal of narrative elements beyond anyone's capacity to know them exhaustively; at the same time it unmoors those elements from the restricted relations that narratology has conventionally assigned them. Flattened in *The Body Artist*'s self-commentary are the space from which we imagine discourse emerging and the space in which it appears. Hartke's loss of Robles becomes a metaphor for the unmooring that enables and accompanies the arrival of certain phrases.

While for the past century, nearly, there has been a strain of literary theory that hoped and aimed to develop a science of literature,[11] there is a more recent but very powerful strain of thought that has worked to show the historical contingency and specificity of what we call science. Today, with the humanities under fire, literary criticism is caught somewhere between the pressures to reinvent itself as an empirical discipline and to double down on its claims for the value of humanistic inquiry itself. Attempts to repair the reputational damage done by the "hermeneutics of suspicion" are not obvious candidates for bringing literary analysis into debates about the nonhuman or the work of networks. If anything, turning to the nonhuman might be taken to enfranchise a new suspicion, that humans are less central than they have thought themselves, less powerful than they have imagined, and more fully subject to forces that are not, on the face of it, cultural.

In this dissertation, however, I emphasize that we can productively distinguish Latour's brands of skepticism and empiricism from the thread of suspicion that culminated in a "growing sense of fatigue with critique" (Anker 18).[12] Although postmodernist metafictions are notorious for their attacks on the sanctity, surety, or security of knowledge, the insights and narratives of contemporary metafictions may be harnessed to bridge the extremes of empirical realist description and relativistic constructionism. Fictional discourse is not so fully bracketed off from the rest of the world as is sometimes imagined. To claim, as I do, that fictional, critical, and political

[11] See, e.g. Todorov 30-31 and also Chatman's preface to *Story and Discourse.*

[12] If one is looking for structures of suspicion, however, one can probably find them without too much difficulty in Latour's revealing of long-hidden aspects of the "constitution" of modernity in *We Have Never Been Modern*.

discourse have the same stakes is not, in Latour's words, "to get *away* from facts but *closer* to them, not fighting empiricism but, on the contrary, renewing empiricism" ("Why Has…?" 231, Latour's italics). Ultimately, my readings contribute to ongoing debates about where literary scholars locate the agency behind signification. Narratives, I contend, are neither only the utterances of their authors (real or implied) nor only arrays of words to which the reader or critic brings all the narrative and signifying force. They are, rather, a set of unusual real-world objects that, without being alive, nonetheless can speak about themselves.

Chapter 1 – "Nothing Goes Away": *Cat's Eye*'s Frameworks for Viewing as Narrative Poetics

1. A "Postmodern Gothic *Künstlerroman*"?

Cat's Eye has often been studied as a *Bildungsroman*, and more specifically as a *Künstlerroman* – a narrative about the maturation of an artist. Susan Poznar, contrasting *Cat's Eye* with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, calls the novel a "Postmodern Gothic *Künstlerroman*," because it "demonstrates how a self-reflexive postmodern fiction might recycle seemingly trite devices into uncontainable images that menace the autonomy and integrity of those whom they 'haunt'" (103, 67). In other words, the trite device of Walpole's ghost-inhabited painting is liberated (from its frame, say) by *Cat's Eye*'s self-reflexive form. While "Walpole rapidly defuses the threat of ontological and epistemological instability introduced by the dismembered apparition and the haunted portrait" (82), the hauntings of *Cat's Eye* are not, in Poznar's view, "literal" (her scare-quotes), and certain images, both painted and avoided, remembered and forgotten, hold sway over the novel's characters (83). As Poznar has it, *Cat's Eye*'s protagonist, Elaine Risley, "becomes at once tormented heroine, enigmatic specter, and, as artist herself, that very conjuring power which confers presence and absence within the aesthetic microcosms" (82-83).

Poznar's emphasis on Risley's "conjuring power" is, however, misplaced. *Cat's Eye* represents Elaine Risley grappling with her past and present lives while visiting a city so packed with mnemonic cues that she feels like she has traveled back in time. The narrative's temporal discontinuities combine with Risley's forgetting and remembering of crucial episodes from her past to contrast different versions (usually

different ages) of Elaine Risley's voice. And yet, as Risley tries to comprehend how she relates to Cordelia, her old friend and nemesis, the different versions of her voice become entangled: a past scene narrated in the present tense, from young Elaine's point of view, will suddenly contain a retrospective observation that threatens to contaminate the whole "naive" narration.[13] Even chronologically organized narratives may proceed by fits and starts, "jumping o'er times," as Shakespeare puts it in the prologue to *Henry V*, and "turning the accomplishment of many years into an hour-glass." But while *Henry V*'s chorus begs the viewer's indulgence, *Cat's Eye* takes the opposite line by repeatedly highlighting the interpenetration of voices just described and Risley's failure to narrate autobiographically. From her perspective, indeed, the whole telling is oriented toward (preparing for and speculating about) her potential *future* encounter with Cordelia. This conjectural narrative orientation prevents the Risley of Poznar's description from becoming the heroine of her own story. Although Elaine Risley is a painter who grows up in Toronto, and although the novel conveys scenes from her childhood, adolescence, art training, and later adulthood, Risley is neither heroine nor specter. *Cat's Eye* structures its narrative around a series of frameworks for viewing, each of which highlights an observer's efforts to remove herself from a scene in which she is, however, inscribed. The maturity of Risley's artistic production is stipulated from the novel's early chapters, and the question the narration addresses is less *How did Risley become an artist?* than *How do the configurations of a scene determine its relations to both observer and observation*?

[13] I disagree with Dvorak, who claims that "on the whole [Atwood] adheres strictly to the stance of the naive narrator" (300).

The novel's conjectural or speculative answer to this question lies in its mapping of spatial and visual fields onto linguistic ones and vice versa; and it is possible to read both directions of this mapping as flattening the novel's narrative. On the one hand, scenes in which Risley struggles to look through or beyond a surface and into the depths of a pool of water, a hole in the ground, or a ravine on the outskirts of Toronto are flattened by their rendition as narratorial discourse, in which the scenes cannot be seen in their supposed depth. On the other hand, *Cat's Eye*'s narration maps substantial parts of its own story onto Risley's paintings, as when her painting *Unified Field Theory* flattens the extended temporality of Risley's falling through the ice into a temporally frozen image. However much these activities produce epistemological or ontological instability (the dominant concerns of modernist and postmodernist fictions, respectively (McHale)), *Cat's Eye* concerns itself primarily with how narrative discourse generates, contains, and connects objects of different natures and scales: paintings and memories, stories and their tellings, frameworks for viewing and lost friends.

While Poznar draws illuminating contrasts between *The Castle of Otranto*'s paintings and *Cat's Eye*'s images, perhaps she doesn't sufficiently explore the contradictions within the latter: "The totemic image," she writes, "opens up a *matrix of relations* between the female artist and her body, between the image and its creator, between the image and its beholder, and between the image and its predecessor images" (105, Poznar's italics). Poznar's phrase "Postmodern Gothic *Künstlerroman*"

begs the question whether the named genres are mutually compatible.[14] In containing such a matrix of relations as Poznar describes, *Cat's Eye*'s images distinguish themselves from *Otranto*'s not so much as updates to the Gothic tradition (relocating the stakes of haunting from social disruption to psychic disruption), but as the products of a genre concerned with the production, reproduction, perception, and description of its own contents. And it is this "matrix of relations" that calls for narratological investigation specifically, as *Cat's Eye*'s narrative discourse strives repeatedly to abdicate the position whence it seems to emanate. Even as details of Elaine Risley's life or lives accumulate from page to page, the narration returns again and again to a particular framework for viewing, in which observed and observer are rendered mutually inaccessible by an intervening image, surface, or screen. When Elaine Risley imagines looking "down through [time], like water," when she falls through ice at the bottom of a ravine, or gazes down from a bridge into that same ravine years later, or when the discourse describes a painting that incorporates and transforms elements of that same setting, the novel experiments with where and how to place Risley (some version of whom is always narrating) within a single, paradigmatic scenario so that she is erased from the scenes that she narrates, both as observer and as participant.

My reading of *Cat's Eye*'s frames, then, interprets the novel's narrative experimentation as an attempt to delineate its own poetics by testing the conditions of possibility for narrating a life. Neither biographical or chronological in its

[14] Poznar, in particular, seems to accept that "Postmodern" just means "self-reflexive" (and possibly contradictory) and then works to illuminate those aspects of the novel that are explicable in terms of the other two genre labels.

organization, *Cat's Eye* is remarkable for how it pushes and pulls its settings and characters through time and through the ontological modes of reality, possibility, and potential (what is, what might have been, and what might yet be). People, places, and things are lost and found in memory; the reappearance of Cordelia is anticipated, half-realized, and then withdrawn; and at moments the narration even renders characters simultaneously living and dead.[15] While giving the illusion of filling in Risley's biography, the novel leaves important events suspended among multiple contradictory descriptions and different ontologies. Nor does it finish with any particular achievement – for example, with the triumphal execution of a particular painting, a "masterwork" such as often marks the climax of a *Künstlerroman*.[16] Instead, the categories of presence and absence, and life and death, like those of present and past, remain perpetually reversible. But the framing and reframing (sometimes quite literal) of the novel's central scenario invites one to set aside these ontological contradictions in favor a narrative analysis focused the hybrid object[17] that is the frame itself. The novel's framework for viewing plays at least three roles: it is a metaphor for the retrieval of past events; a (shifting) rubric for the narration of a life; and itself the object whose development gives *Cat's Eye* a narrative progression.

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[15] There's some parallel here with *The Body Artist*. Marc Schuster reads DeLillo's fictional artist, Lauren Hartke, as learning to encounter her husband's death "in an ambivalent fashion" – where ambivalence is Baudrillardian resistance to consumer culture (177).

[16] Poznar also notes that, unlike a traditional *Künstlerroman*, *Cat's Eye* does not bend toward the hero's production of a "masterwork" (99).

[17] The term is Latour's. See especially *We Have Never Been Modern* 30. While Latour's hybrids are "mixtures of nature and culture," the framework for viewing, in *Cat's Eye*, is hybrid in its mixture of narrative *form* with narrative *participation*. It is thus a hybrid of discourse and story, those domains that narratology typically endeavors to separate.

In what follows, then, I hope to recalibrate critical descriptions of this difficult novel. I begin Section (2) by illustrating how the questions *Cat's Eye* raises over the ontological status of its paintings can be reframed as questions of narrative poetics. Then in sub-sections (2a) through (2c) I chart the novel's multiple reconfigurations of its narrative perspective and frameworks for viewing, arguing along the way that the notion of narratorial "unreliability" is not up to the task of describing *Cat's Eye*'s narration. In Section (3) I develop a flat-narratological account of the novel, which organizes it as a non-biographical (and non-character oriented) story. This account takes the novel's framework for viewing as the narrative object whose story is told, and Section (4) considers the implications of this poetics for the ontologies of Elaine Risley and her paintings, especially *Unified Field Theory*, whose metafictional function I elaborate. Finally, Section (5) characterizes the novel as an extended speculation about language's effects in the making and mapping of loss; and it locates the flatness of *Cat's Eye*'s narrative discourse in its attention to the power of words over worlds and even life and death.

2. From *Cat's Eye*'s Ontologies to Poetics

Between the table of contents and the opening paragraph of *Cat's Eye*, one encounters an untitled page of notes and acknowledgements that highlights the peculiar status of certain objects in the novel. "The paintings and other modern works of art in this book do not exist," Atwood writes. "Nevertheless, they have been influenced by visual artists Joyce Wieland, Jack Chambers, Charles Pachter, Erica Heron, Gail Geltner, Dennis Burton, Louis de Niverville, Heather Cooper, Willian

Kurelek, Greg Curnoe, and pop-surreal potter Lenore M. Atwood, among others; and by the Isaacs Gallery, the old original." And so, before the novel has even begun,[18] the ontological status of the objects it represents comes into question via Atwood's apparently gratuitous denial of their existence. On the one hand, Atwood admonishes her readers that there is no point in looking outside the text for the "paintings and modern works of art in this book"; but on the other hand, she draws a line of influence between real artists and fictional art that elides her authorship of the latter. She may mean simply that she, the author, has been influenced by the artists whom she names, and that she owes them a debt of gratitude for the fictive descriptions that she deploys. Nonetheless, the author's writing about a character's paintings as though they were real – in the same gesture that denies their existence – reflects the novel's and the narrator's uneasiness with the ontological status of what they describe.

Risley's paintings, in particular, have struck critics as ontologically puzzling. Poznar reads Risley as so distanced, at times, from the products of her own efforts that she "is reluctant to 'own' the eyes which paint *or* view this work" (94, Poznar's italics). Poznar implies that Risley feels "interrogated by the picture or compelled to query the ontological status" of her *Pressure Cooker* series (95). What Poznar doesn't explicitly mention is that Risley made the six images of her mother "right after she died" because, in part, Risley "wanted to bring her back to life" (Atwood 167). Risley invests *Pressure Cooker* in advance with the desire to cross the boundary between life

[18] The note appears, in fact, before the two title pages. In a book that broke some number of the conventions of the contemporary novel in codex form, like *S* or *Nox* we might more readily question the sincerity of such a prefatory statement, especially if it were titled "Preface."

and death, then finds the paintings detached from this desire when the series is interpreted by others.

Marta Dvorak addresses the ontological status of Risley's paintings via a close reading of the ekphrasis associated with them. She remarks that when Risley describes her first paintings not made from present models, the ekphrastic discourse "takes on a paratactic form that erases discursive segments whose function is to indicate relationships between syntagms. The syntactic erasure in appearance suggests a corresponding absence of ontological or logical relationships" (304). In other words, the paragraphs beginning "I paint a silver toaster"; "I paint a wringer washing machine"; "I painted three sofas"; and "I paint a glass jar" (Atwood 366-367) engage in what Dvorak calls "mere juxtaposition" (304); they imply that these objects bear no meaningful relation to one another or to the fact that Risley has just discovered that she is pregnant. Nevertheless, Dvorak says, the canvases "tremble" with meaning, both biographically (with respect to Risley) and symbolically (with respect to the critic). Somewhat surprisingly, she sums up her reading of these early paintings in terms that bring Atwood unnecessarily into the account:

> Atwood's objects indeed are "simply there," or in ontological terms, simply *are*. They show nothing, point to nothing beyond themselves. Yet the narrator who "has no image of [her]self in relation to them" admits that they "are suffused with anxiety." She insists that it is not her own anxiety, but that the anxiety "is in the things themselves." Atwood has indeed charged her objects with anxiety, and they "tremble." (304, Dvorak's italics)[19]

Dvorak's point might have been made by underscoring the contradiction between the narration's assertion that the objects Risley paints are "simply there" and the

[19] Dvorak's quotations are from *Cat's Eye* 367 in the edition I cite.

confession (in the same voice, Risley's) that they are "suffused with anxiety." But it is not so clear what moves Dvorak to endorse the "simple thereness" of the objects and to repeat it via her own claim that "Atwood's objects[…] in ontological terms, simply *are*." It's not clear what makes the objects *Atwood*'s, given that Risley narrates the ekphrasis. Dvorak doesn't elaborate, but we can infer from her ascription of some elements of the discourse to Atwood rather than Risley that in Dvorak's view, Risley has somehow absented herself from her own narration.

Alternatively, I suggest that the narration pursues such self-absence without ever quite achieving it, and that this paradoxical pursuit motivates *Cat's Eye*'s metafictional form and the order of its narrative, the series of movements within the novel's central image of an observer divided from what she observes by a literal or a metaphorical surface: Elaine Risley as a child is buried underground; she falls through the ice and into a creek at the bottom of a ravine, then gazes up at the bridge above; and from the opening page she conceives of time as something you look "down through… like water" (3). An older Risley paints the image of the creek below the bridge and the Virgin of Lost Things hovering above it; and on her last day in Toronto, Risley visits the new bridge over the same ravine. The reconfigurations of this image or scene largely govern the novel's structure, and the various surfaces through which Risley tries reach the inaccessible – the space or position that doesn't contain her *and* which her presence does not contaminate – are analogous to one another, to the surfaces of her paintings, and to the surface of the text itself. Not that we or Risley

have the option of reading these surfaces *instead* of what lies beyond them[20]; rather, *Cat's Eye* insists on a common form of separation between observer and observed, for which surface-as-barrier is a sign. It asks for, and tries to imagine, a poetics of this separation, a theoretical groundwork for reading the relations that operate across such a barrier. And we, like Risley, require a method of reading that handles the flattening of ontological differences to this plane.

The ontological differences between present and past, active memory and potential memory, real and unreal, occupied and empty are all represented in *Cat's Eye* by the surfaces through which observers look; and those differences are simultaneously challenged by dictum that "Nothing goes away" (3). Both portraying and eliciting speculative approaches to the inaccessible – efforts to be where one is not – *Cat's Eye* models the kind of reading that it requires. For all of the novel's uneasiness with its objects' ontological status, *Cat's Eye* doesn't come to shake up ontological distinctions *per se*, but to wrestle with how fictional discourse both enables and hinders access to what fictions contain.

2a. Example: Down Through Time Like Water

Cat's Eye's opening lines are not properly narrative, but argumentative, descriptive, or speculative about the nature of time and what gets lost in it. "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space. If you can bend space you can bend time also, and if you knew enough and could move faster than light you could

[20] I am not advocating "surface reading" in the mode described by Marcus and Best in "Surface Reading: An Introduction" (2009).

travel backward in time and exist in two places at once" (3). Immediately we are faced with the question whether to take these statements as true of *Cat's Eye*'s diegetic world: they look as though they might state a philosophical or science-fictional premise for the narrative that follows. *Cat's Eye* will return to the trope of time's nonlinearity, but as it happens, these sentences don't signify a world-building premise. Far from definitive, the statement recedes in authority as it gathers context. The sentences exemplify the novel's efforts to destabilize its own discourse and de-center its narration. The text proceeds,

> It was my brother Stephen who told me that, when he wore his raveling maroon sweater to study in and spent a lot of time standing on his head so that the blood would run down into his brain and nourish it. I didn't understand what he meant, but maybe he didn't explain it very well. He was already moving away from the imprecision of words. (3)

The initial claim about time's structure ("not a line but a dimension") thus turns out not to originate with Risley or to receive her unqualified endorsement. Possibly childish, possibly misread or misunderstood, or perhaps irremediably imprecise, Stephen's image of time as a dimension is immediately replaced by the narrator's own vision, which is also the first iteration of the novel's central framework for viewing: "I began then to think of time as having a shape, something you could see, like a series of liquid transparencies, one laid on top of another. You don't look back along time but down through it, like water. Sometimes this comes to the surface, sometimes that, sometimes nothing. Nothing goes away" (3). Unable to control what "comes to the surface," or whether anything does, the viewer in this scenario stands outside of time (a fantasy that this fiction can only *almost* make true). Time has a visible "shape," but the location of the viewer goes undescribed. Later reconfigurations of this framework

might permit the viewer to examine the ground on which she stands; here, however, powerless with respect to the past, the time-independent viewer confronts from a distance whatever may rise to the level of perceptibility. Containing the unseen as permanently as the seen (since "nothing goes away"), the past becomes both intimate and alien, subject to the forms of speculation that the future normally invites. We might even take this symmetry between the future and the past as justifying the narration's movement between the two.

Tension remains, however, between Stephen's idea that one might move between two times and Risley's metaphor of time as a pool that contains everything. Indeed, as the narration reconfigures its framework for viewing, it eventually suggests that Risley herself might "exist in two places at once." Hence, we can see *Cat's Eye*'s narrative wrestling to synthesize two ideas of time; and it is worth noting that one of them is explicitly discursive, while the other is imagistic. Risley treats Stephen's formulation, "Time is not a line but a dimension," as a *sentence*, something she repeats to Cordelia later and something whose insufficiency or opacity may be due to its linguist form.[21] (Risley notes that Stephen "was already moving away from the imprecision of words.") In contrast, she doesn't translate her own vision into words for Cordelia, although narrating Risley perforce puts into language what (young) Elaine Risley began "to think." Already *Cat's Eye*'s narrative discourse begins to open a space between Elaine Risley the character and the perspective, quality, or nature of the narration: Risley the character follows Stephen's movement away from words by becoming a painter; but Risley – as narrator – is constrained to the realm of discourse.

[21] "'Stephen says time is not a line,' I say. Cordelia rolls her eyes, as I knew she would" (4).

This particular foregrounding of discourse would not suffice, by itself, to undermine accounts of *Cat's Eye* as a *Künstlerroman.* Molly Hite, who reads the novel as the story of the making of an artist, writes that "[a]s a *Künstlerroman*, the novel seems to license a double substitution: for painter, read writer; for writer, read writer of this novel" (135). If, as Hite claims, "The question of how to read [Elaine Risley's paintings] is in many ways analogous to the question of how to read *Cat's Eye* as a whole," then perhaps we could take this opening image as a key to reading the novel (138). Maybe the "series of liquid transparencies" could represent the layers of Elaine Risley's past, through which she guides the reader. Maybe their liquidity and transparency could explain why different eras or events from Risley's past sometimes overlap with one another in her telling. And yet what lies below the surface, in this framework for viewing, is not just the past, but all of time, and the situation of the viewer looking down into time from outside it is unstable. And so Hite, too, concludes that "*Cat's Eye* finally authorizes not a transgressive glimpse into some pre-existing private realm of the 'real,' but a reminder that the 'self' of self-representation is always seer as well as seen, and that both seer and seen are implicated in the social construction of how one looks" (155). In other words, even if we could imagine a viewer narrating from outside time, the realm into which that viewer looked would not be "pre-existing" or "private" but co-constructed by the seer and the seen. Self-representation is fraught to begin with, and *Cat's Eye* does not slice personal history into distinct layers so much as it explores the possibility of occupying and abandoning different positions in that framework of viewing and attempts to describe the (blank or transparent) surface that holds those positions apart. It is deeply concerned with the

complexities of rendering visual and temporal dynamics in prose, and its progression through different arrangements of seer and seen flattens both image into discourse and narration into image.

2b. Theory and Example: A Submersion

The central problem of *Cat's Eye*, then, is one of relationality. Whatever position Elaine Risley's narration takes up, the life it tries to recover and describe from the outside is routed through the position presently occupied, and so the opposite side of the surface has or holds the emptiness toward which Risley personally aspires. At different moments in *Cat's Eye*, Risley aspires to empty spaces for two reasons or in two ways: First, the empty space represents the ideal place (outside time, say) from which her life could be narrated entire. Second, it represents a place of escape from her personal misery. But every time Risley goes through the surface, she fails to occupy that other space. In this novel's poetics, passing through the barrier between seer and seen only achieves a reversal of the paradigm.

This problem of relationality is also the problem taken up – optimistically, one might say – by speculative realist philosophy in general and object-oriented ontology in particular. In Quentin Meillassoux's telling, philosophical defenses of empirical description have been hampered since Kant by the view that in knowing the world, human minds only come to knowledge of their own structures of perception. All experience is mediated first by the perceiving body and second by the organizing mind, the argument goes, and so knowledge of the external world is impossible.

Meillassoux calls this "correlationist circle" (5),[22] and one can see the appeal, in such a philosophy, of simply flipping the scenario: if one could *become* that other thing, one could know and describe from within, but then one would have given up the perspective from which one desired to know. Meillassoux argues that this correlationist philosophy is fallacious, however. Some forms of description, especially quantitative description, can't fail, on his view, to talk about an external reality, "an absolute" (28). And on a somewhat different but equally relevant tack, Graham Harman argues that relations themselves are external things that we can know, co-constructed as they are by all the parties (persons, ideas – indeed objects in general) involved in them.

Analogously, the changing relations among the narrating Risleys and between the narration and the narrated, the seeing and seen, are the story proper of *Cat's Eye*. The paintings Elaine Risley makes remain invisible to a reader, but the narrative discourse is stuff that a reader encounters directly. As it alters the terms of the framework for viewing, it narrates the developing relationship between Risley's narrating present and her biographical past, and scenes of burial represent an early stage of Risley's desire to cross through the surface dividing the viewer and the viewed.

One of these scenes, echoing and modifying the metaphor of time as a pool, attempts to define (or portrays Elaine Risley attempting to define) the narratorial present as distinct from the past, on the one hand, and from her life, on the other. With

[22] Meillassoux defines correlation as "the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other" (5). (He also distinguishes between "weak" and "strong" correlationism (35).)

respect to the past, the present is defined by the language Risley uses to herself and by the change in the price of an ice cream cone: "I'm lying on the floor, on a futon, covered by a duvet. *Futon, duvet*: this is how far we've come." In the past, "there were no futons and no duvets" and "the price of an ice cream cone was five cents. Now it's a dollar if you're lucky, and not as big either." So "[t]hat's the bottom-line difference between then and now: ninety-five cents" (13).

When Risley characterizes the present in terms of her life, however, her perspective shifts from an end-point ("this is how far we've come") to a mid-point: "This is the middle of my life. I think of it as a place, like the middle of a river, the middle of a bridge, halfway across, halfway over. I'm supposed to have accumulated things by now: possessions, responsibilities, achievements, experience and wisdom. I'm supposed to be a person of substance" (13). The narration has now tried in two different ways to *place* Elaine Risley. First it tries placing her on the floor in her ex-husband Jon's studio in the time and place of futons, duvets, and dollar ice cream cones. But then it tries (less certainly) to place her "in the middle" of her river-like life. Whether this second placement supplants or supplements the first, it gives some direction to the perspective that was at first relatively static. No longer "lying on the floor," Risley is "halfway over." The narration also implies a preference for suspension over submersion by following "the middle of a river" (where one might be wet) with "the middle of a bridge." It also replaces "halfway across," suggesting lateral movement, with "halfway over," indicating her position above the metaphorical

waters.[23] This evolution of images separates the narrating Risley from the future and past on which she reflects, and her movement is orthogonal to the river's, whatever the river represents. Separated from the flow of her life, Risley also denies feeling like "a person of substance." She is transformed via this series of passages from someone simply lying in an apartment, reflecting on her life, into something rather more peculiar and subject to different kinds of motion:

> [S]ince coming back here I don't feel weightier. I feel lighter, as if I'm shedding matter, losing molecules, calcium from my bones, cells from my blood; as if I'm shrinking, as if I'm filling with cold air, or gently falling snow.
>
> With all this lightness I do not rise, I descend. Or rather I am dragged downward, into the layers of this place as into liquefied mud. (13-14)

Not only does Risley deny being a "person of substance," she conceives of herself becoming immaterial; and when she is "dragged downward into the layers," the narration makes a first revision to the framework for viewing that Elaine Risley imagined as a child. It's not that she adopts Stephen's suggestion of time travel and time as a dimension: rather than winding up in two places at once as a result of much knowledge and speed, Risley gets bogged down in one place, involuntarily, where multiple times overlap. The image of overlapping times is her own ("a series of liquid transparencies"), but now she is not only looking down into it, but moving through it; and the layers have changed from "liquid transparencies" into "liquefied mud."

Analogous to Risley's account of her own experience, *Cat's Eye*'s narrative and chronological structures sustain a tension between the relations of suspension and

[23] "Halfway over" might also be taken to return from a spatial organization to a temporal one, where "over" means "done" or "complete."

submersion. The same waters can appear either clear or muddied, and the narration can either descend into their midst or look down upon them from above, unable (by its own account) to call up a particular event from their depths. “Nothing goes away,” in the first version Risley offers up of her ontology of time (3). Nonetheless her narration trades in scenes and objects whose status hangs contingently on questions that the story won’t answer or that Risley cannot resolve. “Apart from all this, I do of course have a real life,” Risley tells us, shortly after denying her substance, but “[a]longside my real life I have a career, which may not qualify as exactly real” (15). With such gestures the narration self-indulgently promises to ground a real Elaine Risley in the kind of everyday life a reader might recognize, then almost immediately takes the promise back. If Elaine Risley’s career “may *not* qualify as exactly real” (my emphasis), this narration provides neither access to Elaine Risley’s stipulated “real life” nor any indication what that reality would consist of.

2c. Reliably Reversible Burial

It may be objected that, by itself, the narratorial offering and retraction of a promise does not suggest either a poetics of its own or the need for methodological innovation in narrative studies. Wayne Booth coined the term “unreliable narrator” in *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961), and his approach to categorizing narrators remains influential. James Phelan largely follows it in his analysis of unreliable narration in *Living to Tell About It: A Rhetoric and Ethics of Character Narration* (2005). Phelan begins by pointing out that that a character narrator performs multiple functions that can sometimes interfere with each other. Its “telling” functions are discursive and

include narrating to the narratee ("narrator functions") and revealing information to the authorial audience ("disclosure functions"). Its "character" functions are "the ways in which characters work as representations of possible people ([…] their mimetic functions), as representatives of larger groups or ideas (their thematic functions), and as artificial constructs within the larger construct of the work (their synthetic functions)" (5-6). Like Booth, but with greater precision, Phelan defines unreliability as a gap between what a character narrator says to its narratee and what an implied author says to its authorial audience.[24]

Since the implied author and the authorial audience are central to Phelan's account of what a text means and its ethical import, his approach can run into trouble when, as in *Cat's Eye*, the critic's access to some of these positions is blocked. Phelan imagines a feedback loop among authorial agency, reader response, and textual phenomena (10). When the reader's access to authorial agency is blocked, then the ethical responsibility for judging characters gets thrown onto the reader.[25] The blockage itself becomes a rhetorical effect, one that calls on the reader to position him-

[24] The implied author is not, itself, an unproblematic category, and before Phelan can advance his own ethical account of unreliable character narration, he has to wade through the messy debate occasioned by Booth's invention and reification of the implied author.

[25] This is what happens, according to Phelan, at the climax of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day*:

> Because Ishiguro's particular use of character narration here blocks our access to conclusive signals [from the implied author] about how to respond, the effect of his technique is to transfer the responsibility for disambiguating the scene to the flesh-and-blood reader, and the deciding factor in how we each carry out that responsibility is *our individual ethical beliefs as they interact with our understanding of Stevens as a particular character in a particular situation*. In other words, the consequence of Ishiguro's technique at this crucial point is that he invites our own ethics to play a crucial role in shaping our response to the scene. (60, Phelan's italics)

The implication of Phelan's commitments is that, if narrative is rhetoric, then its source is a person, an author or an implied author, and what and how it signifies (the most important thing, from the point of view of structuralist poetics) is less important than the effects of the feedback loop on the readers of a text.

or herself authoritatively with respect to the story. As a consequence, there is little room in Phelan's model for discursive instability to infect the source of narration: Either the implied author is legible, constructible in a fairly definite way, or else the reader is in a position to judge the characters and events of the narrative without authorial guidance. His criticism is "realist" in the sense that story-world events are the objects of evaluation for all the persons that witness them or participate in them: characters, implied authors, and readers. In *Cat's Eye*, however, as we have already seen, the nature of the "real" is in play, and in order to naturalize the narrative, to make it cohere biographically (as Phelan would insist on doing), one must make not ethical judgments, but ontological ones.

As the extant criticism on *Cat's Eye* demonstrates, this task is achievable. With concepts like self-division (Hite 139), braided discourses (Banerjee 514), and interwoven double narrative (Dvorak 299), it might seem that critics are well equipped to describe *Cat's Eye*'s peculiar discourse. Yet as these critics explicate *Cat's Eye*'s themes – optical or concealing, "denying the past" (Banerjee) or "telescoping past and present" (Dvorak) – they simplify the set of perspectives that *Cat's Eye* has on offer. To reach their conclusions regarding what the novel is *about* (gendered and disciplining gazes, "hiding," or the polysemy of linguistic and visual signs, respectively) they synthesize voices and discourses of different qualities and from different times in Risley's supposed biography. Naturalizing *Cat's Eye*'s discourse so that it narrates an artist's life, they look past narratological questions that are just as present in the autobiographical story Risley tries to tell as they are in un-simplified narration: Which elements of narrative discourse belong above the surface, and which

can be submerged? How should a narrator work (with) the reversibility of these categories?

The two events that mark reversals in the power dynamics between (young) Elaine Risley and Cordelia both prioritize the difficulty of bridging gaps between mutually inaccessible conditions or positions: knowledge and ignorance; memory and forgetting; dominance and subjugation. Both events also deal expressly with the border between life and death, rendered as a surface below which the dead are submerged and above which life carries on. First there is the live burial, possibly datable to Remembrance Day, November 11, in which Cordelia, Grace and Carol bury the eight-year-old Elaine in Cordelia's backyard. They cover the hole with wooden boards and cover the boards with dirt (115). Second is Elaine Risley's near-death experience, when she falls through the icy surface of the creek in the bottom of the ravine where Cordelia has thrown her hat. In both scenes, Risley's "reliability" as narrator is beside the point, since the first problem is to understand how the narration juxtaposes – or navigates among – mutually inaccessible narratorial positions. (Young) Elaine's present-tense narration has no access to the older Risley's self-evaluation, while the narrating Risley asserts her loss of memory with respect to the events described. Yet the narration proceeds anyhow, proposing and evaluating relations of different kinds between these positions.

Both biographically and discursively prior to the ravine scene, the live burial revises the framework for viewing established in the opening chapter, producing a new interior tension. No longer (only) standing above the surface and outside time, the narration descends with Elaine underground, into the hole; for all that, it doesn't

entirely abandon the perspective of the observer looking down. Instead, a shift in narratorial perspective dramatizes the difficulty bringing these two positions into clear causal, temporal, or psychological relations. In the brief chapter (Chapter 20) that contains this scene, the hole in Cordelia's backyard is figured first as a place of anticipated social connection, then as a place of utter isolation, and finally as a cue to Risley's rich, yet misplaced, perceptual memories. This hole is the most "promising" of several that Cordelia has begun digging (114). Looking forward, Elaine narrates how Cordelia "says we can use it for a clubhouse, we can put chairs down in the hole and sit on them. When it's deep enough she wants to cover it over with boards, for a roof" (115). At this stage there is little hint that Elaine will badly abused by her friends, although her social distance from them has been marked, for example, by her unfamiliarity with Cordelia's table settings and by the Risley parents' anxiety over Mrs. Smeath's plan to bring Elaine to church (78, 103). Before the live burial is related, the narration turns to a school commemoration of Remembrance Day and the children's memorization of John McCrae's "In Flanders Fields." The poem's opening clause appears as evidence of the memorization, but the sentence "We are the dead" interrupts a paragraph narrating the eleven o'clock minutes of silence. "*We are the dead*," italicized, thus appears as Elaine's interior monologue, at once giving voice to the dead (as the poem itself does) and prefiguring Risley's occupancy of both sides of the life-death divide.

The inclusive plurality of "*We are the dead*" contrasts ironically with the isolation into which Elaine is about to descend:

> Cordelia and Grace and Carol take me to the deep hole in Cordelia's backyard. I'm wearing a black dress and a cloak, from the dress-up cupboard. I'm supposed to be Mary, Queen of Scots, headless already. They pick me up by the underarms and the feet and lower me into the hole. Then they arrange the boards over the top. The daylight air disappears, and there's the sound of dirt hitting the boards, shovelful after shovelful. Inside the hole it's dim and cold and damp and smells like toad burrows.
>
> Up above, outside, I can hear their voices, and then I can't hear them. I lie there wondering when it will be time to come out. Nothing happens. When I was put into the hole I knew it was a game; now I know it is not one. I feel sadness, a sense of betrayal. Then I feel the darkness pressing down on me; then terror. (115-116)

These two paragraphs narrate Elaine's isolation from her friends in terms that also suspend the burial scene between event and non-event. "Cordelia and Grace and Carol," evenly connected to one another by the paratactic "and," have put Elaine in the position of a dead person "already," and so, in the world of their play, the burial isn't what kills Elaine. Nor, in narratological terms, is the burial what isolates her, since the "ands" linking the three other girls plainly exclude her already. But in the register of Elaine's experience, the burial divides her from her friends: it deprives her of daylight, their voices, their loyalty, and her sense of time's passage. Once down in the hole, "Nothing happens."

For the moment, then, the hole is a place of non-relation. In it, Elaine loses access to her friends, and in "wondering when it will be time to come out," Elaine herself is in the position of "this" or "that" or "nothing" which may come to the surface of time's pool in the novel's earlier image (3). She's been translated from the exterior viewer to the contents of the depths, and the perspectival shift that immediately follows the paragraphs quoted above reinforces the inaccessibility of

those contents. Elaine is, in effect, divided from Risley when the narration abandons (young) Elaine's narration and picks up with Risley's retrospective account[26]: "When I remember back to this time in the hole, I can't really remember what happened to me while I was in it" (116). In this self-confounding language, Risley both "remembers back to this time" (apparently making some kind of journey) and "can't really remember what happened." At this stage in the novel's configuration of its framework for viewing, the figure for Risley's lack of memory is an empty visual field. She narrates having "no image of [her]self in the hole; only a black square filled with nothing, a square like a door. Perhaps the square is empty; perhaps it's only a marker, a time marker that separates the time before it from the time after. The point at which I lost power" (116).

Risley's apparent effort to recall this episode contrasts with later passages in which she confesses an active will toward forgetting. "I don't want to remember," she tells us. "The past has become discontinuous, like stones skipped across water, like postcards: I catch an image of myself, a dark blank, an image, a blank" (329). Risley thus punctuates her past in visual terms, with blanks separating images from one another. The burial scene exemplifies how Risley's narration stitches together

[26] Actually, a grammatical ambiguity anticipates the change in perspective. In the clause "Up above, outside, I can hear their voices," the spatial markers technically modify the pronoun "I," although the rest of the sentence suggests that they modify "their voices." It is appropriate, though, that we get this hint of Elaine Risley outside the hole, even in the passage that narrates her burial, because Elaine elsewhere creates and describes such dislocations. For example, she learns how to faint "almost whenever [she] want[s] to" (191). "There's a way out of places you want to leave, but can't," she narrates. "Fainting is like stepping sideways, out of your own body, out of time or into another time. When you wake up it's later. Time has gone on without you" (189). As in Risley's account of her life, location, and profession (13), the contrast appears between moving into and out of depths, on the one hand, which requires crossing a surface barrier, and movingly *laterally* ("stepping sideways"), on the other. My thanks to Fredric Bogel for pointing this out.

forgetting and remembering. Even as it insists on the irretrievability of what goes on under the surface, it brings that space into relation, showing how the inaccessible remains active. The older Risley "need[s] to fill in the black square of time, go back to see what's in it" (116). "If I could even see the undersides of the boards above my head it might help," she tells us, although we have no way of determining from what biographical moment Risley might be narrating. "I close my eyes, wait for pictures" (116).

What happens next nicely illustrates *Cat's Eye*'s complex temporalities. While Elaine's time in the hole is a blank, there is a "wait" with some duration while Risley recollects what turns out to be "the wrong memory" (117):

> At first there's nothing; just a receding darkness, like a tunnel. But after a while something begins to form: a thicket of dark-green leaves with purple blossoms, dark purple, a sad rich color, and clusters of red berries, translucent as water. […] *Nightshade*, I think. It's a dark word. There is no nightshade in November. (116-117, Atwood's italics)

The live burial scene culminates, then, in the replacement of visual and spatial reckonings with a single word. The darkness gets filled in temporarily by the image of nightshade, and the "translucent" berries let light into the scene; but instead of resolving into a clear image, the memory crystallizes around the italicized word, which remains "dark." Then the memory is shunted from the narrative timeline, since "there is no nightshade in November." The live burial makes a permanent impression on the narrator, but an impression she can only belatedly access by negation. It is a "marker" of the before and after that itself lacks discernible features. The only image Risley can retrieve from the experience is the wrong one, and it is flattened almost immediately into a word.

"Nightshade" recurs in a passage that anticipates the central scene where Elaine goes through the ice below a bridge. Elaine, in Grade Five, defers an encounter with Cordelia, Grace, and Carol in order to imagine her suicide in terms of erasure and disassembly: "I think about becoming invisible. I think about eating the deadly nightshade berries from the bushes beside the path. I think […] about jumping off the bridge, smashing down there like a pumpkin, half of an eye, half of a grin. I would come apart like that, I would be dead, like the dead people" (172-173). Nightshade is connected to death not just by the live burial scene, but also by its offer of suicide.[27] Crucially, however, the crossing over into death is about barring Elaine's tormentors from reaching her, and not about terminating Elaine's existence. Here, and elsewhere, the narration promises that there's something to be *like* when one is dead.[28] This persistence of the inaccessible sustains the novel, which depends on the unfulfilled promise that Risley will encounter Cordelia once again.

The live burial isolates Elaine negatively, separating her from the social circle on which she depends as a child and severing her childhood experience from her adult memory. Emphasizing both Elaine's and Risley's lack of images, it connects the positions of the two narratorial perspectives with a word, "nightshade," that resonates for both and seems to dissolve the surface that separates them: "The nightshade is a

[27] The smashed pumpkins of this suicidal ideation also appear in Chapter 20, which opens with Halloween before moving into Remembrance Day.

[28] The novel offers a profusion of suspended deaths that show, taken together, how becoming invisible, dying, and going away are no guarantee against being. For example, Risley figures her parents as "dead but also alive [….] lying side by side, in their summer clothes, and sinking down through the earth, which is hard but transparent like ice" (185). Whether this is Elaine's dream or Risley's much later account – whether, in other words, Elaine Risley's parents are chronologically dead or alive – goes unspecified. In either case, the narrator stays above the surface: "They look up at me sorrowfully as they recede" (185).

common weed. You pull it out of the garden and throw it away" (117). In other words, it comes out of the surface of the ground beneath which Elaine has been buried, and yet "the flowers, the smell, the movement of the leaves persist" in memory, "rich, mesmerizing, desolating, infused with grief" (*ibid.*). Nightshade's sensorial persistence instantiates the power of discourse to link positions separated by a surface, and participates in the novel's figuration of burial as reversible.

In contrast, the creek experience to which we next turn stages a positive isolation. Elaine is again separated from Cordelia, Grace, and Carol, but she is also rescued (reintegrated into a social space) by the appearance of a vision that Elaine provisionally identifies as the Virgin Mary. Here it is not discourse that crosses a gap, but a kind of hallucination. The live burial and the ravine scene thus come into tension over the nature of what divides and bridges the positions of seer and seen, living and dead, et cetera. The development of this configuration becomes *Cat's Eye*'s story.

3. *Cat's Eye*'s Framework for Viewing: a Narrative Object

Appearing near the center of the novel, Elaine's descent into the ravine introduces a scenario that has staying power and through which the narration will continue to experiment with different frameworks for viewing. In the first pass, the narration performs multiple balancing acts to suspend the scene outside the reader's (or Risley's) apprehension. When Elaine goes down to get her hat, which Cordelia has thrown over the side of the bridge, maybe Elaine goes through the thin ice intentionally. Maybe the narrating Risley knows one way or the other. Maybe Elaine's vision of the Virgin Mary, hovering above the bridge, is real. These possibilities

persist, in part, because the position of the observer, up on the bridge, goes both filled and unfilled; and because this version of the scene reverses the earlier trope of an observer looking into water. Later, however, Risley will return to this geographical setting as a teen and as an adult; and she will paint a canvas, *Unified Field Theory*, based on the vision Elaine has down in the ravine. Each narrative return to this scenario entails a new configuration of the framework for viewing, and I will diagram these frameworks below.

In its most general form, the framework is just a division between observer and observed. A barrier of some kind – an image, a surface, a screen – keeps the two apart:

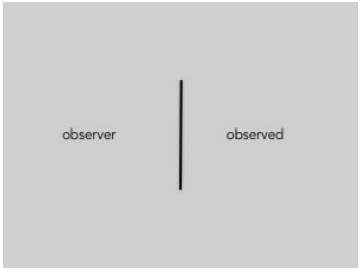

Figure 2

Risley's childhood account of time renders the framework hierarchical, with the observer looking down into the past.

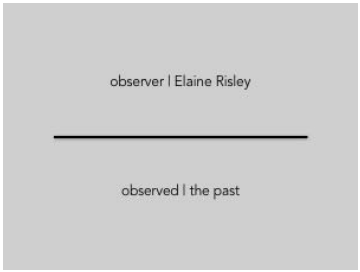

Figure 3

The live burial shows how the past remains alive, but although it positions (young) Elaine underneath the ground, nothing can be seen from there; seeing remains the (limited) power of the older Risley looking back.

The ravine scene appears at first to map easily onto the framework already established. When Elaine goes through the ice, the narration reminds us that this water is the place of the past: "The water of the creek […] comes straight from the cemetery, from the graves and their bones. It's water made from the dead people, dissolved and clear, and I am standing in it" (208). This immersion in the past differs from the live burial in several ways, however. In the burial scene, the hole was prepared and the boards were put in place and covered with dirt after Elaine was already below the surface. But in the ravine there's no sense that Elaine is "already" dead. She has to *break* the ice, crossing the barrier between present and past more actively than before. This raises the question of whether Elaine is abdicating the position of the observer for the position of the observed, or whether by falling into the water she somehow collapses the distance between observer and past time that the narration has earlier established.

When Risley looks up from the stream at first, "Nobody is there" (207), but this emptying of the position of the spectator is unstable and temporary. When Risley looks again, "There's someone on the bridge, I can see the dark outline. At first I think it's Cordelia, come back for me. Then I see that it's not a child, it's too tall for a child. I can't see the face, there's just a shape. One of the yellowish-green lights is behind it, coming out in rays from around the head" (208). The vagueness of this vision is striking, as is Risley's attempt to identify with the figure when it begins to move: "She isn't falling, she's coming down toward me as if walking, but there's nothing for her to walk on." Risley thinks, "I would like to be able to walk on air like that" (209).

It is evident that when the ice breaks, the barrier between past and present, between observed and observer, does not vanish. Instead, the scenario becomes dynamic: the bridge, rather than the broken ice, somehow substitutes for the surface of time's pool (or the surface of the ground in the burial scene). Elaine is positioned beneath, and the bridge begins empty, then holds "someone" with a "dark outline" who in turn begins to descend through the air.

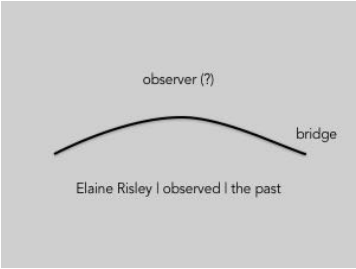

Figure 4

That Risley "would like to be able to walk on air like that" suggests both her desire to leave the bridge and her wish to navigate between the categories that surfaces in this novel hold apart. There is no way, however, to make narrative sense of Elaine Risley's movements through this scenario. The fact, for example, that late in Elaine's middle school years, "[t]he wooden footbridge over the ravine is torn down" does not prevent her from revisiting this scenario: "I go one day and stand at the top of the hill on our side of the ravine, watching the bridge come down. […] I have an uneasy feeling, as if something's buried down there, a nameless, crucial thing, or as if there's someone still on the bridge, left by mistake, up in the air, unable to get to the land. But it's obvious there's no one" (222). Even when there is no bridge, Risley's sense of the bridge remains, as does her feeling that something remains down below. The framework for viewing persists even when the structures that supported it earlier are torn down.

Later, a new concrete bridge spans the same gap, and when Risley visits it on her return to Toronto, it becomes possible to map her features onto what young Elaine observed so many years before, from below. The "yellowish-green lights" may be the new lampposts; and the "glimpse of red," which young Elaine takes for the heart of the Virgin Mary, is explicable as a hint of middle-aged Risley's cerise jogging suit, visible where her coat parts in front. Finally, even the words that Elaine's vision speaks, "You can go home now," are among the words that *Risley* directs to her vision of a *past* Cordelia (209, 459).

In biographical terms, what's on the bridge while Elaine freezes in the creek below could be Cordelia (but isn't) and could be the Virgin Mary, although Elaine only says to her mother, "A lady helped me" (210, 211).[29] Or, more convincingly from a certain perspective, what's on the bridge is just Risley looking down into the creek and backward in time; and if that's the case, then Risley willy-nilly occupies the position of the spectator that Elaine abandons when she descends into the ravine. In any case, the position of the observer, high above, empties and fills and empties again in this first iteration of the scenario.

Later, however, the adult Risley returns to the spot, and the events we have just analyzed are narrated and re-narrated again.[30] "From here it looks neutral," Risley relates, looking at the transformed place where years ago she suffered, but this

[29] Actually, Elaine moves over a period of two days from total certainty ("It's the Virgin Mary, there can be no doubt") to the feeling that a "hazy space" has filled the time between falling into the creek and seeing her mother, a space in which she is "not sure now, that it really was the Virgin Mary" (212).
[30] For extended discussions of this operation see both McHale's chapter "Worlds Under Erasure" (in *Postmodernist Fiction*) and Richardson, Brian. "Denarration in Fiction: Erasing the Story in Beckett and Others." *Narrative*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2001, pp. 168–175.

appearance of neutrality evidently doesn't satisfy her, and the narration carries us, with Risley, back into the scene: "I stand at the top of the hill, take a breath. Then I start down" (457). In this passage, which closely follows Cordelia's failure to appear at Risley's gallery opening (both discursively and chronologically), the novel returns to its original framework for viewing: an observer looks down towards a surface which she may or may not get through. Atypically, Risley's narration here remains for some time in the past tense – sort of:

> That was where I fell into the water, there is the bank where I scrambled up. That's where I stood, with the snow falling on me, unable to summon the will to move. That's where I heard the voice.
>
> There was no voice. No one came walking on air down from the bridge, there was no lady in a dark cloak bending over me. Although she has come back to me now in absolute clarity, acute in every detail, the outline of her hooded shape against the lights from the bridge, the red of her heart from within the cloak, I know this didn't happen. There was only darkness and silence. Nobody and nothing. (458-459)

Although this passage describes Elaine's childhood experience in the past tense, it also points actively, presently, to the places Risley identifies; and the "lady in a dark cloak" returns to Risley "now." The narrative thus balances the vision's coming back to Risley "in absolute clarity" against the definite statement that when Elaine was down in the ravine "[n]obody and nothing" were there. Presence, it turns out, keeps on trumping absence, even after Risley recognizes – when Cordelia finally fails to show up at her opening – "I've been prepared for almost anything; except absence, except silence" (452).

The contrast between different versions of the ravine scene make the configuration of *Cat's Eye*'s narration extremely difficult to parse in terms of character

or biography. Most directly, we may be unsure what to conclude about Elaine's vision from the bottom of the ravine. Did she see anything, or did she only imagine that she did? Further, if the novel has a single narrator, then that narrator, Risley, sometimes appears to occupy Elaine's perspective so completely – telling Elaine's story in present tense, using Elaine's words – that it becomes too difficult to say in what way Risley, rather than Elaine, is narrating. But taking Elaine to be a separate, second narrator would further fragment an already disjointed life-story. Given Risley's self-consciousness about memory, her confessions of forgetfulness, and the scientific discourse through which the narration sometimes explicitly approaches time's nonlinearity, it seems a bit cynical to conclude that Risley reports Elaine's memories, in Elaine's voice, so unreliably that she interposes images of her adult self between the soaked, freezing Elaine and the unthinkable emptiness atop the bridge. On the one hand, such a reading of the narration would carelessly diminish the power of its persistent present tense to render the fluctuations of Elaine Risley's self-knowledge over time. On the other hand, there seems to be something equally wrong and equally cynical with the alternative view, that Elaine and Risley literally become visible to one another across the decades. Such a transaction would render the diegetic world comprehensible as a science fiction at the cost of vitiating the text's deep engagement with how memory and history *come into view*.[31]

[31] Brian Richardson notes that "narrative self-erasure" can have a variety of functions, and that it need not produce ontological instability when there is "a stabilizing frame available" (101). My claim is that framework for viewing, although it takes different forms in different scenes of *Cat's Eye*, provides such a stabilizing frame.

We require, therefore, a reading that makes sense of *Cat's Eye*'s complex narrative modes by describing and sustaining (rather than biographically resolving) the aesthetic and philosophical conundrums posed by Elaine Risley's burial, submersion, and suspension, and by the tenacious concurrence of the forgotten and the remembered in Risley's first-personal narration. When the novel offers up a narrating voice that describes a blankness at the very point (on or above the bridge, for example) from which it supposedly emanates, this is not – or not only – a way of rendering a biographical narrative of trauma into prose. It is rather the grounds for taking Elaine Risley to have a liminal ontology, a "transitional" way of being observer and observed, through whose shifting frameworks *Cat's Eye* narrates a story (6).

4. "Whatever it is by itself" / "Or so you think"

The ravine scene, as first narrated by Elaine, tells in several ways how the position of the observer on the bridge gets emptied out. Elaine herself descends from the bridge into the ravine; Cordelia, Grace, and Carol leave, too; and the "dark outline" of a woman who appears afterward also begins a descent from the bridge, through the air. The adult Risley, however, visits this location from above, and when she tries to reaffirm the vacancy of this position ("There was no voice. No one came walking on air down from the bridge," etc.), she reinscribes herself in the scene (458, 459). It seems, then, that Risley's opening premise, that "nothing goes away," maintains some force of truth, even in the face of Risley's never actually meeting Cordelia again. This oscillation between insistent presence and definite absence is rendered in different ways by each iteration of the framework for viewing. The

oscillation is an action central to the novel's narrative – both how it is told and what happens in it.

The liminal ontology of *Cat's Eye*'s protagonist, then, is best understood by treating the versions of Elaine Risley as metafictional hybrids of story and discourse whose narrative roles are shaped by this oscillation in and out of visibility. These versions are not representations of a single character whose life-story they tell in different ways, but are themselves participants in a story about how seer and seen interact. And *Cat's Eye* offers Risley's paintings as a metafictional model for how to read its suspended narrative poetics – its denials and repetitions that allow incompatible and mutually inaccessible versions of Elaine Risley to coexist in the discourse. The position of the observer in the novel's framework for viewing is not finally contained in Elaine Risley's biographical time or space, but the framework for viewing is itself a narrative object, and one that traditional narrative poetics centered on characters, plots, and settings may not identify as such. Taking the framework for viewing (rather than Elaine Risley) as the entity around which *Cat's Eye*'s major action revolves enables special attention to the resolution offered by Risley's painting, *Unified Field Theory*, which in turn permits us to locate the position of the observer in the metafictional space where words flatten into images and vice versa.

Unlike the ravine scene, *Unified Field Theory* removes the observed figure from below the surface or barrier, not from above it, although the scene it depicts resembles the ravine scene closely. While there is "a woman dressed in black, with a black hood or veil covering her hair" floating above, "[u]nderneath the bridge is the night sky, as seen through a telescope. Star upon star, red, blue, yellow, and white,

swirling nebulae, galaxy upon galaxy; the universe, in its incandescence and darkness. Or so you think. But there are also stones down there, beetles and small roots, because this is the underside of the ground" (446, 447). Without a human figure in the lower third of the canvas, the underside of the bridge becomes a version of the scene as a whole, rendered on a smaller scale and self-similar, like a fractal: It is a "night sky," with stars hung in it, but also subterranean, evoking both the burial in Cordelia's backyard and the cemetery whose water feeds the creek.

Unified Field Theory, then, in its composition and in the narrative description of it, is a metafictional device. By rendering the above and the below (the positions, respectively, of observer and observed) not as adjacent and divided, but as recursively containing each other, the scene establishes a perspective *outside* itself, a view that belongs to neither the young Elaine nor the older Risley and that is underlined by the phrase "or so you think." Within the narrative world (i.e. diegetically), Risley refers with this phrase to her imagined viewer, someone standing in the gallery and looking at the painting. Beyond the story world, however, it apostrophizes the reader, who, unlike Risley's imagined viewer, has no independent access to what Risley describes and no way to perceive it visually.

Borrowing its title from a lecture Risley's brother Stephen has given (and that Risley attended), *Unified Field Theory* makes a pun that depends on the novel's discourse – that would not, in other words, be accessible to any of the characters. In physics, *unified* field theories are those that describe all of the fundamental forces together, but no such theory is accepted, and possibly none exists. Similarly, *Cat's Eye*'s fourteenth (and penultimate) part is called "Unified Field Theory," and holds out

the promise or illusion of gathering the novel's competing narrative voices under a single rubric. To do so, however, one must perform the impossible action of removing oneself from the framework for viewing, becoming neither observer nor observed. As it happens, Stephen's lecture ends on a speculative note. It asks, "what of the moment beyond the first moment? […] Or does it even make sense to use the word *before*, since time cannot exist without space and space-time without events and events without matter-energy?" (361, Atwood's italics). In the novel, then, the phrase "unified field theory" evokes a question about the inaccessible (the prior-to-time) even as it names a theory that unifies and explains. The painting, meanwhile, pictures the eponymous cat's eye marble, presumably like the one that Elaine tucked away for years and then rediscovered in the trunk in her mother's basement. The cat's eye has been much discussed as a symbol or metaphor for the novel's conception of vision. But in the present argument, what matters is not vision, but observation. While Risley can "look into [the marble], and see [her] life *entire*," in *Unified Field Theory* the cat's eye would be opaque to a diegetic visitor – and to a reader of the novel, the marble is perceptible only in words (434, my italics).

Cat's Eye's narration says little enough about writing. "[T]he imprecision of words" impresses Risley a great deal, as does her brother Stephen's apparent preference for numbers, but painting generally underpins *Cat's Eye*'s structure – without, however, managing to *appear*. The novel thus comments formally on its own telling, at the remove created by translating one medium into another. Although the novel's parts are named for Elaine Risley's paintings; although the plot is geared towards producing its anti-climax at the opening of Risley's retrospective show; and

although Risley describes certain of her paintings in significant detail, the paintings themselves, rendered linear by their translation into words, cannot be perceived whole by the reader, nor can they be taken in all at one moment.[32] With their visual qualities trapped below or beyond the surface of the text, they occupy a position analogous to whatever lies below the surface of time in the novel's guiding image, and so it seems that they should situate the reader in the position of the observer up on the bridge. But we have seen how unstable the positions of *Cat's Eye*'s observers always are, and we have also encountered commentary coming from below, both in the burial scene and in Elaine's experience in the ravine. The paintings do not quite fit into the framework for viewing that the novel elsewhere establishes, but rather comment on it.

Risley's aspiration to empty certain landscapes, certain passages, of her own presence reinforces this treatment of her paintings as exceptions to (or from?) the narrated world. When Risley visits the bridge and becomes, in some way, the object of Elaine's vision from below, she imagines, symmetrically to Elaine, that *Cordelia* has come into view: "I know that if I turn, right now, and look ahead of me along the path, someone will be standing there. At first I think it will be myself, in my old jacket, my blue knitted hat. But then I see that it's Cordelia" (459). This "seeing" is especially strange. The narration blatantly omits any transition between the imagined and the real, but goes from thinking to being in an instant. And so it begins a fully rendered scene in which Risley reaches out to try to comfort Cordelia with the powerful words, "*It's all right. You can go home now*," words that echo what Elaine heard years before

[32] See Kittler (esp. pp. 103-104) on the relation between linguistic discourse, artistic and mechanical media, and the stoppage and storage of time.

(459, Atwood's italics). Yet moments later, when Risley "turn[s], finally, Cordelia is no longer there" (460). So wherever Elaine Risley is positioned, she imagines she sees Cordelia, not herself; and as this section closes, Risley purports to be done with seeing altogether: "There's nothing more for me to see. The bridge is only a bridge, the river a river, the sky is a sky. This landscape is empty now, a place for Sunday runners. Or not empty: filled with whatever it is by itself, when I'm not looking" (460). Risley strives here to narrate an empty landscape, the thing that continues when she stops observing; but paradoxically her language fills the space. This filling in, however, unlike the empty landscape, is something the novel can and does describe, repeatedly and well. Far from telling the story of Elaine Risley's survival and maturation, it tells of the persistent, ever-changing relations between observer and observed that go on even beyond the narrator's capacity to access a scene.

Ultimately, by burying Elaine, by almost drowning her, by suspending her in the air and in the future above the scene of her own near-death, by twinning her with her friend and nemesis Cordelia, and by painting the ravine scene from a position that the scene excludes, the novel urges the reader to discover the narrative material that its narrator cannot touch, namely the phrases and frames that drive the story.

5. Conclusion: "You can stop playing that"

At the end of 2c. above, I suggested that some of *Cat's Eye*'s scenes rely on the power of discourse to bridge ontological gaps, while others rely on vision – particularly hallucination. Overall, however, *Cat's Eye*'s narrative organization flattens the discursive realm into the visual and vice versa. Elaine's visual

hallucination in the ravine hinges on the appearance of comforting words that are not heard "out loud" (209); similar words close Risley's peculiar vision of Cordelia in the novel's penultimate chapter[33]; and *Unified Field Theory*, the painting whose composition makes it the keystone of *Cat's Eye*'s reflexive commentary, depends for its effect on the words of its title and the discourse that provides exclusive access to its supposedly visual contents. Perhaps the most potent words in *Cat's Eye* are those that flatten life into death, though not into non-existence. First they belong to Stephen, Elaine's older brother, who makes Elaine "play war" with him:

> I am the infantry, which means I have to do what he says. He waves me forward, motions me back, tells me to keep my head down so the enemy won't blow it off.
>
> "You're dead," he says.
>
> "No I'm not."
>
> "Yes you are. They got you. Lie down." (26)

Stephen's authority over Elaine is rooted in vision ("There is no arguing with him, since he can see the enemy and I can't" (*ibid*.)), but his authority is exercised in language. When, as *Cat's Eye* approaches its end, Risley co-opts Stephen's life-taking and life-making authority, she relies on his language to banish Cordelia, in spite of not having seen her at the gallery on the evening her retrospective opens. That night, after acknowledging to herself that "*Cordelia has a tendency to exist*" (453, Atwood's italics), Risley addresses her old friend, and apparently Cordelia responds:

> *You're dead, Cordelia.*
> No I'm not.
> *Yes you are. You're dead.*

[33] The vision is peculiar because it wavers between Gerald Prince's "disnarration" (in which an event that is imagined or hypothetical with respect to the story world is narrated) and Brian Richardson's "denarration" (in which an event is narrated as though it occurs in the story world and then denied in subsequent narration).

Lie down. (454, Atwood's italics)

It appears then that the novel has translated the domain in which these words operate from a childhood game into a serious imperative, and from play on "swampy ground" to play across the textual surface of the narrative (26). Risley's late imperative to Cordelia to "*Lie down*" acknowledges the absent Cordelia's existential intrusion into Risley's world, but commands it to flatten itself; and we can infer the success of that late command by the absence of any further reply from Cordelia.

Cordelia's non-appearance at the gallery isn't the final word. Nor is the silence (marked by white space and a chapter break) that follows Risley's imperative, "*Lie down*." Actually, Risley has already conceived of herself "headed for a future in which [….] Cordelia vanishes and vanishes," and her final vision of the young Cordelia, on the bridge above the ravine, is still to come (451-452, 459-460).

The point is that Risley's desires and efforts to banish Cordelia redound on her, as well. Cordelia and Risley have "changed places," or they are "like […] twins" (249, 450). If either were fully dead or completely vanished, the novel's flattening of different ontological domains would fail; and this mutual dependency is explicitly thematized. Elaine, for example, deploys the image of her own death to rattle Cordelia. "I'm just telling you the truth […]," says Elaine in eleventh grade. "I'm really dead. I've been dead for years" (256). Cordelia's answer, "You can stop playing that," gives Elaine pleasure (*ibid.*); it also calls up the question of whether game and non-game can be properly distinguished in this novel.

Cat's Eye concludes, as it opens, with a narrational gambit, a voice that seems to escape its character narrator, Risley. By rendering the absent and the inaccessible as

a locus (however unstable) from which discourse issues nonetheless, *Cat's Eye*'s narration creates a space into which it can banish Risley without having to delete her, and the novel can strive at last (as Risley herself does) to depict the world in her absence, even though she cannot quite cease to exist.

In the final removal of Elaine Risley from the ravine landscape, Risley may either affirm the possibility of knowing a space beyond its human resonances or may remind us that human knowledge and human perception *are* cut off from a landscape, "whatever it is by itself, when I'm not looking" (460). The narrative remains ambivalent about whether the unpeopled world is properly empty or full, since the landscape is "empty now, a place for Sunday runners. Or not empty: filled with whatever it is by itself […]" (460). Even this idea of being filled with something unlooked at is not quite the final word in this novel, which instead turns to meditate on the inaccessible stars:

> Now it's full night, clear, moonless and filled with stars, which are not eternal as was once thought, which are not where we think they are. If they were sounds, they would be echoes, of something that happened millions of years ago: a word made of numbers. Echoes of light, shining out of the midst of nothing.
>
> It's old light, and there's not much of it. But it's enough to see by. (462)

This closing image appears to endorse the possibility of human examination of what lies far outside the scope of individual human experience; and it is as though Risley has adopted the perspective of her dead brother, the physicist, in the novel-time where she must relinquish her particular past. Even the inhuman stars define and echo an event, "something that happened millions of years ago: a word made of numbers."

Stephen's old doubts about words' imprecision are obviated, it seems, by the possibility of a numerical word "shining out of the midst of nothing." If we can translate the word made of numbers into an image made of words, we may find ourselves with a scant image, but one that's sufficiently present to speculate by.

Cat's Eye is both a realist novel and an experiment. In the course of its peculiar narration, Elaine Risley struggles with a problem that she cannot quite name, which is how to locate herself in a framework for viewing that is, itself, always changing, always subject to a new configuration. These multiple configurations generate multiple and contradictory Elaine Risleys – some remembering, some forgetting, some narrating and thinking, others fixed as objects (rather than subjects) of observation and speculation. One might go so far as to argue that, on its own terms, *Cat's Eye* is the narrative of a dead Elaine or an absent Cordelia who are somehow, improbably, the same person – the machinery of the novel kept in motion by the suspension of their qualities of being in the realm of speculation. But this reading pushes the bounds of plausibility, given the interplay between Risley's honesty, openness, or candor and her ongoing pattern of self-undermining speculation. Rather than relegating *Cat's Eye* to the domain of horror-fantasy or science-fiction, which would diminish the force of its psychological and ontological queries, it is preferable to consider the novel a species of metafiction, bent on investigating its own capacity to render surfaces, depths, and whole lives from linguistic material that literally cannot be living.

Cat's Eye plays up and plays on the different temporalities that govern a reader's assimilation of textual narrative and a viewer's assimilation of a painting. The novel interjects material and visual components that, like the eponymous marble,

appear and disappear both for characters and for the reader. More importantly still, it repeatedly revises its own scheme for the spatiotemporal relationship between observer and observed. The novel thereby invites readers to explore the textual dimensions of fictional objects and lives as part of the story. If "nothing goes away" in *Cat's Eye*, it is also the case that everything pops into and out of presence, into and out of immediate accessibility, and most crucially for the workings of this metafiction, into and out of language. *Cat's Eye*'s self-reflexive narrative poetics and the ontological speculation that its narration models are mutually illuminating and are very much *Cat's Eye*'s point.

Chapter 2 – Digressive Labor and Taxonomic Narrative in Colson Whitehead's John Henry Days

1. Finding Form

In contemporary debates over critical and post-critical reading practices, those wishing to move beyond or outside the genre of critique have often advocated deference to the forms and contents of the text itself. Counterproductively, a fantasy of textual form's independence or isolation from those who perceive it undergirds certain positions, as though form were not a relation, but a simple given. Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus highlight this givenness in at least two of their half-dozen accounts of what "surface" might mean in "Surface Reading: An Introduction." Under the heading, "*Attention to surface as a practice of critical description*," they explain that "what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is already present in them. […] The purpose of criticism is thus a relatively modest one: to indicate what the text says about itself" (11). Later, under the heading "*Surface as the location of patterns that exist within and across texts*," they note that "In this type of surface reading, the critic becomes an anatomist breaking down texts or discourses into their components, or a taxonomist arranging and categorizing texts into larger groups. The anatomist and taxonomist rearrange texts into new forms but nonetheless attend to what is present rather than privilege what is absent" (*ibid.*). Since these accounts do fall under different headings, Best and Marcus are presumably alert to the tension between the views that (1) "form, structure, meaning" are "already present" in texts and that (2) "the anatomist and taxonomist rearrange texts into new forms." Surely such arranging could be done in numerous ways for any particular text, and this

suggests that theory really does bring form and meaning to texts – and possibly imposes them.

While this tension reflects the diversity of practices that Best and Marcus gather and explore under the rubric of "Surface Reading," it also points to a thorny question about the nature of form itself. Limiting the scope of that question to the domain of literary texts, on might be tempted to ask:

> *—Is form objective, a definite characteristic of the literary text, where it may found, observed, and described by a critic?*
>
> *—Or is form relative, a contingent product of some interaction between texts and readers?*

In the course this chapter, I will reject this formulation of the question, but the positions implied here are not straw men, either. Caroline Levine's *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* defines forms intentionally broadly as "all shapes and configurations, all ordering principles, all patterns of repetition and difference" (3). This definition underpins Levine's important distinction between form and "genre," which depends on "the different ways in which [form and genre] traverse time and space" (13). On the one hand, "any attempt to recognize a work's genre is a historically specific and interpretive act" because "one might not be able to tell the difference between a traditional folktale and a story recently composed for children or to recognize a satire from a distant historical moment" (*ibid.*). In other words, genre recognition is contextual. It depends on the position and condition of the observer, and so the nominal genre of a text may change over time, especially if the historical conditions of its production and dissemination are up for debate. On the other hand, however,

> Forms, defined as patternings, shapes, and arrangements, have a different relation to context: they can organize both social and literary objects, and *they can remain stable over time*. One has to agree to read for shapes and patterns, of course, and this is itself a conventional approach. But […] once we recognize the organizing principles of different literary forms – such as syntax, free indirect speech, and the sonnet – *they are themselves no longer matters of interpretive activity or debate*. (13, italics added)

For Levine, linguistic and literary forms require conventional definition, but once the forms are so defined, there can be no question whether they are found in particular texts. "Patternings, shapes, and arrangements" can be articulated and then discovered. Forms are in and of the material they shape, and their stability allows them to "travel across time and space in and through situated material objects" (10). The objectivity of forms, on this account, is what makes them so useful for analysis, and the richness of analysis comes from the interactions of multiple, overlapping, and often competing forms, each of which "affords" different actions, experiences, observations, potentials, limits, and so on (6).

In contrast to Levine, Ellen Rooney's sharp defense of symptomatic reading, "Symptomatic Reading is a Problem of Form," argues that "the work of form entails the play on words, the rendering of form as reading's effect. […] Form can never be discovered, but must be actively produced" (135). In defending symptomatic reading against Best and Marcus's rejection of it, Rooney is not defending a hermeneutics of suspicion but advocating for the recognition of any reading's positional "guilt," its "debt to the reading it resists, without which it would have neither significance nor consequence nor a field of play" (137). Like Best and Marcus, then, Rooney advocates a mode of reading that avoids critique's pitfall of knowingness. However, for Rooney

surprise does not come from a new and avowedly naive openness to textual surfaces and whatever is perceptible there. It comes rather from the "symptomatic rupture" of which she writes, "its contingency cannot be eluded: a necessary surprise" (142). Because textual form is *not* given in advance, in Rooney's account, no discovery is available. Instead, the nature of reading practice necessitates contingency, including the contingency of form.[34][35]

The positions of Levine and Rooney are not perfectly symmetrical; nonetheless, they clearly offer different strategies for preserving the liveliness and the ethical relevance of literary analysis in a time of methodological foment in the field. Levine argues for embracing forms' mobility and examining as broadly as possible how different literary forms interact with the social and material forms among which they travel and with which they interact. In contrast, Rooney argues for a "provisional" reading practice that is always encountering its own alternatives, rather than forms of other scales and other materials: "Symptomatic reading is a productive practice that anticipates its undoing, undoing itself, again an again; its transformations of form work its surprising openings to the future" (147). The ethical component of symptomatic reading, then, is this encounter with its other that it is always bringing

[34] Rooney's phrasing strangely echoes Meillassoux's proof in *After Finitude* of the "necessity of contingency." Rooney's account of symptomatic reading, grounded in Althusser's reading and rereading of Marx, explicitly embraces Althusser's "anti-humanist unraveling of the subject as consciousness and presence" (142). It thus becomes possible to see, in Rooney's emphasis on the relational aspects of reading, a surprising similarity with speculative realism's attempts to decenter humans from their philosophical accounts of the world.

[35] Carolyn Lesjak describes the contrast I've been outlining in terms of materiality, rather than form: "Surface readers claim, in essence, that Marxist reading practices 'dematerialize' the text—recall Marcus's claim that Jameson 'dismisses the inert given and materials of a given text'—whereas Marxists argue that surface readers falsely materialize texts, thereby enhancing their inertness and forgetting about the real things and real people behind them" (249).

about, rather than Levine's promise to put literary forms into productive dialogue with social ones.

The concern of the present chapter is twofold: (1) to examine how this debate about form's ontology might inform a narratological reading of Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*; and (2) to see what such a reading might return to the debate that motivated it. *John Henry Days* suits the position I've assigned it in this critical call and return because it poses a series of formal questions itself – about myth, identity, and description – and it pursues its answers in a mode that repeatedly hinders the novel's plot. My flat narratological reading of *John Henry Days* accounts for these hindrances by examining the novel's competing logics of digression and taxonomy, and I identify those logics with the critical practices of Rooney and Levine, respectively. I begin by examining briefly the critical reception of *John Henry Days* to date, most of which still considers the novel "postmodern." I then read the novel's accounts of excavation and taxonomy as metafictional reflections on critical treatment of texts. In *John Henry Days*, excavation always reaches a dead end, forcing the narrative digressively onto other tracks. And both forms of labor, taken individually, exhibit a totalizing impulse that inhibits narrative progress. Both also produce examples of what I call "the describer's nightmare": characters or readers confront extreme ontologies in which (a) everything is given, (b) what's given cannot be further described or differentiated, or (c) nothing is given at all. After examining each of these scenarios, I zoom out to consider how the novel's open ending suggests a synthesis of its digressive and taxonomic impulses that I label "ontographic" in the spirit of Ian Bogost. Bogost describes ontography as a "general inscriptive strategy […] that

uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity" (38). In advocating "inscription" rather than "description" and "uncovering" rather than "discovering," Bogost sketches a critical-philosophical practice that works *with* and works *on* what it examines, without either taking the surface for the essence or trying to excavate an object's depths. I conclude that *John Henry Days* has cannily (and uncannily) anticipated the crisis over where and how literary form should be located, and has already moved forward with the labor of self-examination. It enacts that labor by underscoring the narrative potential of taxonomy; hence *John Henry Days* flattens hierarchies of character, setting, and plot in favor of a flat organization of its material that nevertheless makes a story.

2. Critical Reception of *John Henry Days*

John Henry Days may seem like an unlikely fiction through which to explore the ontology of literary form. James Wood sees the novel's concerns as "social, historical and linguistic (rather than characterological, aesthetic, and metaphysical)" (32). Derek Maus, borrowing a term from Linda Hutcheon, reads *John Henry Days* as "historiographic metafiction," its self-commentary bent on revealing the constructed nature of both history and fiction (7-8). Williams Ramsey (like Maus) situates *John Henry Days* in the "post-soul aesthetic" and argues forcefully that the novel is part of a "postmodern shift" where the South, "[o]nce a contested monolith, […] has morphed into multiple narratives of a South that function with increased freedom from the past" (770). Ramsey sees the stakes of *John Henry Days* as ontological, but in the mode of postmodernism's supposed work to undermine our distinctions between real and

unreal.[36] Claiming that "Whitehead offers simulacra of originals that no longer exist, just as the prologue's accounts of John Henry fail to embody the original man," Ramsey concludes bluntly, "What is most at stake in *John Henry Days*, therefore, is the constitutive nature of reality. Wryly, and in the manner of Jean Baudrillard, Whitehead notes, 'the real is so hard to come by these days'" (782).

In contrast to these readings, however, Ramón Saldívar situates Whitehead squarely in the contemporary, in a "a post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights era in American fiction" (1). He describes Whitehead's "postracial aesthetic" as "invested in speculative realism," which he defines as "a hybrid crossing of the fictional modes of the speculative genres, naturalism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, 'dirty' realism, and metaphysical realism" (5). On Saldívar's view, *John Henry Days* "refuses the hegemony of postmodern metaphysics" (5):

> Folklore and historiography are not just the themes of the novel but structure its formal narrative. Whitehead there takes the myths, legends, dreams, histories, and illusions of vernacular knowledge to their wildest ends precisely to question and revalue their validity by asking, what kind of knowledge is available through each of these forms? How do these forms of narrative shape our understanding of "race"? (12)

Saldívar's reading of *John Henry Days* is quite brief, but the takeaway is that in asking about the knowledge "available through each of these forms," the novel embraces a real to which these various narrative forms provide different kinds of access. The real may be hard to come by, but instead of a postmodern satire of the quest for the real, *John Henry Days* "return[s] to the real in its heterogeneous forms" (14). This novel,

[36] See Brian McHale's *Postmodernist Fiction* on the "dominants" of modernist and postmodernist fiction, the former epistemological, the latter ontological.

along with the works of numerous other writers whom Saldívar cites,[37] suggests an alternative to the literary-historical "timeline that takes us from naïve realism to plodding social realism, to triumphant modernism and demystified parodic postmodernism" (14). Instead, "something else results: When placed within a horizon that includes naturalism and realism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, and perhaps speculative realism, Realism emerges as the substratum of narrative that has never been superseded entirely within the history of narrative forms" (*ibid.*). While it is not perfectly clear what Saldívar means by placing capital-R Realism within this "horizon," he clearly reads the genre-mixing novels and hybrid narrative forms of Whitehead and others as embracing "heterogeneous forms" of the real, much as speculative realist philosophers do (14).[38]

Although, like Saldívar, I read *John Henry Days* as adumbrating a speculative realist practice, my path to that conclusion is, in Levine's terms, formal, rather than generic. Rather than situating Whitehead in a "cohort of authors" that "insists on the urgency of the matter of race in the twenty-first century" (Saldívar 3), I focus on the structures of self-reference in *John Henry Days*. Wood, Maus, Ramsey and others have productively read *John Henry Days* as a meditation on the social and cultural values of the John Henry legend or as a "secret history" of Reconstruction (Walonen 69). But there is a payoff, too, in describing the novel via the forms of our

[37] He writes: "In addition to Whitehead and Touré, a host of other writers are also exploring a post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights moment in American racial formations. I refer to writers such as African Americans Percival Everett, Dexter Palmer and Darieck Scott; Asian Americans Karen Tei Yamashita, Sesshu Foster, Charles Yu, and Larissa Lai; Native American Sherman Alexie; Latinos Salvador Plascencia, Junot Díaz, Michelle Serros, Yxta Maya Murray, and Marta Acosta. A case can be made for including Michael Chabon, Gary Shteyngart, and Jonathan Safran Foer's recalibrations of Jewish and Yiddish ethnicity." (3)

[38] Saldívar cites Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux, and Graham Harman (5).

contemporary debates over how to read. Such a description attends primarily to the novel's self-reflective engagement with storytelling, which navigates between the givenness of mythic and historical forms, on the one hand, and the apparent malleability of narrative material, on the other. In its "fractured but connected pieces" (Wood 32), it takes up a speculative subject, the story of a possibly historical John Henry, and, in order to avoid transforming its retelling into an overwriting, delivers what it can by addition and multiplication, "adding verses" of its own.[39]

3. Excavation in *John Henry Days*

The difficulty of *John Henry Days* for narrative theory is its breadth of thematically bound, but narratively disconnected, vignettes. The legend of John Henry, "the steel-driving man," forms the ever-present but un-recoverable backdrop to the main plot line of J. Sutter, the freeloading freelance writer or "junketeer"; and Godfrey Frank's polymorphous (and unread) novel, *A Chiropodist in Pangea*, anchors *John Henry Days*'s lyrical and formal climax. J.'s narrative is thus bracketed by two other stories at opposite ends of the spectrum of specificity. In the John Henry legend, none of the narrative material (the place, the time, the identity of the hero, and so on) is given, whereas *Chiropodist* teems with narrative givens, even as it lacks form. J., then, is held for the duration of the novel between the possibilities of being overblown into legend or reduced to a joke by the ridiculous luck of being shot by accident while on a foolish quest. J. himself struggles to decide between these options, and the form of *John Henry Days*, too, wavers between the mining of real and mythic histories and the

[39] "Adding Verses" is the title of the novel's fifth and final part.

cataloging of disconnected narratives. The critical question, then, might be whether to excavate J. Sutter's (or John Henry's) central narrative (discarding the surrounding dross) or to compile and taxonomize the novel's multiple vignettes about characters who have investigated or been touched by the John Henry legend and song. However, *John Henry Days* thematizes the futility of both of these impulses and offers, as I have already suggested, a different mode or model: a critical labor that sets itself alongside the mechanics of a text, modeling its procedures on the text's own critical maneuvers.

The key image of excavation in *John Henry Days*, of course, is John Henry's hammering inside the mountain, where he drives a bit into rock. Dynamite is placed in the holes he makes and detonated, after which the rubble is cleared and John Henry goes back to the end of the tunnel again to "advance[] the heading" (239, though the phrase occurs elsewhere, too). However repetitive, this labor promises progress, movement deeper into the rock, until John Henry's tunnel meets the one being blasted at the same time from the mountain's other side. But the novel reneges on this promise, figuring the material into which John Henry drills as so recalcitrant that it turns excavation (and narrative) away.

When John Henry dreams of breaking through the last remaining barrier of rock, the result is a nightmare transformation of the mountain's content from stone into flesh. Here is the dream:

> It is odd because it is just him and L'il Bob working the tunnel. John Henry and his partner always work with a second team. It keeps the productivity up. Two pairs of men boring twin holes into the mountain and singing to their work. The sound of the hammer is percussion, each blow a footfall into the mountain on the other side. But today he does not know why they are alone in the darkness and why they do not sing. He cannot see L'il Bob's face and cannot move his mouth to talk to

> him. To find out what is happening. It is as if neither can stop. Their labor pulls them like a stream and it is all they can do to stay afloat. It seems they have been at this hole forever. He cannot seem to get the bit deeper. The mountain has grown harder. They have hit the mountain's heart and the mountain is using all of its ancient will to prevent their violence against its self. It works against them. Then with one blow John Henry feels something give and with the next blow the bit sinks in deep, deeper than he has ever driven before. John Henry thinks, we've hit the western cut. The two ends of the tunnel have met. He is about to cheer. They have won Captain Johnson's bonus. Then the blood comes. (238)

Although the passage opens by naming the conditions that "keep[] productivity up" and enable the "footfalls" that carry the workers deeper into the mountain, the dream isolates John Henry and L'il Bob at the end of their labors, a climactic confrontation with the mountain's center where a second team is unnecessary. Their labor "pulls them like a stream" and threatens to drown them, but it doesn't take them anywhere while the mountain "works against them." The work takes place "at this hole forever"; "[t]he mountain has grown harder." It is clear, then, that the motion of John Henry's hammering can be divorced from the question of his progress. In this dream, progress into stone is at an end, and progress only resumes when the narration transforms the unwilling rock into flesh that yields to the steel-driver's blows.

Breaking through thus entails a transformation of the material John Henry was excavating into the same stuff he is made of himself, and this is how the dream ends: "the rock around him is now flesh. The red shale glistens like animal meat. Ridges formed by the blasting are now tracings of sinew. Veins and arteries. It is a living breathing mountain and he is in its angry guts. The heart of the mountain pours itself over him. The blood is up to his neck. Then the blood spray blinds him again and he is awake" (238-239). This reclassification of the dream-mountain's rock as flesh makes a

horror of John Henry's efforts to drive deeper, since to drive into the depths of the mountain is now to let out its lifeblood. More than this, John Henry's vision of connecting the eastern cut to the western one is revealed as an end he cannot accomplish. To go into the depths of something is not the kind of work (in this novel) that brings one out the other side or achieves its own completion, but the kind of work that transforms material into an antagonist that resembles oneself.[40]

The novel diverts the idea of completed excavation into a dream where, instead of facilitating commercial activity (by extending a rail network), finishing the tunnel is only a step in the direction of returning the sick John Henry to himself: "He had traveled through a series of fever dreams all night. They were coupled together like train cars. He knew that the caboose contained morning and each time he fell asleep he hoped that this time he would step into it. But he opened the door to the next car and stepped again into nightmare" (239). Travel by rail shifts from the abstract motive of John Henry's physical labor (what his labor would eventually enable) to a recursive image of failing to pass through all the way to the end. To sustain this image, it is essential that this version of the John Henry legend ends, like all the others explicitly recounted in the novel, before the tunnel is complete. The stories cannot bring him to the mountain's heart, lest the metaphor turn literal and the blood run out; nor can they

[40] Formally, this digging or excavation that returns one to oneself resembles the "correlationist circle," Meillassoux's account of metaphysical reasoning in the Kantian mode. Ancient rock is even one of the materials that Meillassoux considers a special challenge to correlationism, since it would be absurd to consider our statements about them true "for us," when the statements reach back to the time before humans existed – even before life itself. *John Henry Days*, like Meillassoux, will offer alternative ways of handling the reality that confronts one in one's labor.

bring him all the way through the mountain, where the narrative would lose its motive and its terminus at once.

This inability to complete an excavation faces other characters in the novel, including, for example, Guy Benton Johnson, the historical black sociologist (1901-1991) who makes a plausible stand-in for readers and critics. The narration depicts him struggling with his John Henry material in a voice that is partially his own: "One man against the mountain of contradictory evidence! He has been here three days. Three days, and Guy thinks he can see a little into John Henry's dilemma: the farther he drives, the deeper the darkness he creates around himself" (155). With the verb "drives," Johnson identifies his labor with John Henry's, and his formula for the work ("the farther he drives, the deeper the darkness") is stated with pronouns that could equally well refer to the sociologist or the steel-driver. Although the Guy Johnson vignette is set late in the lifetimes of any who might have witnessed John Henry at work (if John Henry were a historical person), the syntax renders both characters performing the same labor on resistant material.

Neither the mountain of rock nor the mountain of evidence yield to driving, but the Guy Johnson vignette emphasizes a slightly different account of what's wrong with excavation, namely that it fails to get past a surface. Johnson has arrived in Talcott because, although "'The Ballad of John Henry' has picked up freight from every work camp, wharf and saloon in this land," he has "sorted" through all that material and settled on Talcott as the legend's likely point of origin (155). Johnson seems to be getting to heart of the matter, the heart of the mountain, except that what he has extracted from the song's many iterations turns out to contain the song again.

Once in Talcott, "he cannot get two stories to coincide," and some of his informants "have heard the ballad so many times that they manufacture their own spectatorship, stealing lines from the song and offering these in their eyewitness accounts" (155). Ubiquitous but multiple, the song about John Henry reinfects Johnson's research into the song's origins. A glimpse of this logic is legible in John Henry's own vignettes, too. John Henry's preoccupation with the "crag" under which he passes each time he goes down the tunnel exemplifies the reproduction within the mountain of the mountain's foreboding face, so that his excavation also fails to get past the surface (85). In several ways, then, *John Henry Days* becomes a story of material that instead of yielding as one goes deeper into it, returns one recursively to an earlier encounter with the same.

John Henry Days refuses to resolve the legend of John Henry. Elements of his story are specified again and again, but in inconsistent or contradictory terms. Besides going out of its way to relate the details ascribed to him by various characters, the novel also foregrounds contradictory versions of the legend in its prologue, a concatenation of anonymous testimonials about John Henry that place him in different work sites and affirm or deny the possibility of his ever have raced against a steam drill. Making him an object of historical and sociological investigation by characters could have turned the novel into something of an essay on John Henry's cultural weight, but the novel also tells its own version of the legend, a narrative cut short before the race that makes John Henry a hero.

The narration of *John Henry Days* digresses habitually from the central, late twentieth-century plot line, and much of the narration attends to labor that doesn't

carry work forward. Guy Johnson reminds himself that "*we make our own machines and devise our own contests in which to engage them*" (163, Whitehead's italics). Meanwhile, both John Henry's contest with the steam drill and J.'s pursuit of the record (to which I will return below) are beside the point of the two characters' usual employment. John Henry's job consists of drilling into rock at the furthest reaches of the slowly growing Big Bend tunnel, "advancing the heading," but his race, although it also consists of drilling, will happen outside. It is a simulacrum of his real work,[41] and a digression that is quite necessary in light (or shadow) of the impossibility of completing excavations. It is, very exactly, a plot device that distinguishes John Henry's hammer swinging from that of other workers in the tunnel and that brings him to a personal, rather than collective, confrontation. As for J., he is supposed to produce content to fill the lanes of the internet, the "Information Superhighway" (185), but his quest to match Bobby Figgis's record of consecutive days junketeering (having his room, board, and travel paid for by a magazine or internet content provider) sets him apart from his content-producing peers. What's more, pursuing the record only involves attending consecutive publicity events, not actually writing about them. Toward the novel's end, too, J. finds himself thinking about another story, Pamela Street's or his own, which has nothing to do with the web content he is assigned to write. Thus J. and John Henry, along with Guy Johnson, are differentiated from their peers by their digressions; and they are mobilized into narrative when recalcitrant

[41] In this it resembles the "GENUINE STEEL-DRIVING EXHIBITION" at the 1996 John Henry Days festival (318).

material turns their work away and they find themselves in dramatic, but not productive, confrontations.

So essential is the steam drill to the structure of John Henry's legend, that Whitehead even invites the machine to speak, describing it at the start of the novel's final part as an actor about to go on stage: "Standing patiently in the wings, resisting the temptation for one last smoke before the big scene, the steam drill, the heavy in this particular drama, waits for the cue. What's a hero without a villain?" (341). And yet, *John Henry Days*, doesn't reach a climax through its characters' confrontations but always seem to be recounting how things are before they are *worked out*. When J. and John Henry approach their material as a matter of surface and depth, they are stymied. They would end up (if the narrative carried them far enough) only returning to themselves. And in the contests to which their narrative lines are diverted, where they pit themselves against the products of artifice, and they also do not make narrative progress, exactly. True, the invitation to the steam drill to speak ("Steam drill, can we get a soundbite" (342)) puts it briefly on a par with John Henry.[42] For the space of a section, it becomes not just his antagonist but potentially the hero of its own narrative. This potential however, serves to undermine the steam drill's position as chief antagonist, and indeed "[t]he Burleigh steam drill is the terminus of a series of inevitabilities, but only terminus until the line is extended, the rails laid farther into frontier, until the next model replaces and advances the heading" (341). In so far as the drill becomes a protagonist (rather than an antagonist), the structure of its story

[42] The narration even imagines "The Ballad of Jo Jo the Steam Drill" – "no chart-topper, virtually unhummable by human mouths, and you can't dance to it besides" (341).

becomes interminably repeatable. The promise of the Burleigh drill's obsolescence confirms the pattern of digression that I have been laying out.

Thus, the work of excavation in *John Henry Days* produces a pair of unexpected effects: the laborer discovers only himself in the dark depths to which he has driven; and with this lack of progress through the expected material, a digressive logic kicks in. The story shifts sideways to relate another task, feat, or contest. But this shunting of the narrative away from labor's completion turns out not to resolve the question I posed earlier, whether literary form, or forms more generally, are objectively present in material or relative to the work one puts into it. Images of excavation as violence suggests that it is a work of imposing; if so John Henry's nightmare might be an effort to warn off the excavating interpreter of *John Henry Days*. But the mountains of material that John Henry and Guy Johnson confront also seem to recoil against them, perhaps maintaining their forms in the face of violence. Johnson perhaps recognizes this when he finds the motivation to continue his work in the maxim he has written down and carries in his billfold, "*we make our own machines and devise our own contests*." The declaration affirms that his work returns him to something he has himself produced; but it sidesteps the problem of the mountain-as-material, the mountain's own form, by putting Johnson in contention with a machine, instead. When this novel's digressions prevent narratives of excavation from reaching their conclusions, they still allow narrative material to pile into visibility. In order to grasp the novel's narrative logic, one must deal with this profusion of material. It asks the novel's characters, and its readers, for a different kind of work.

4. Describers' Nightmares and Extreme Ontologies

As critics have pointed out repeatedly, *John Henry Days* is a novel of diverse materials and modes. For example, Wood and Jonathan Franzen in their reviews and Ramsey and Saldívar in their articles all stress, in different ways, the challenge *John Henry Days* poses to a basic description of what happens in it. Franzen notes that "[t]here is very little story to speak of beyond the pageant, the scripted performance, of the eponymous event," and refers to "the book's essentially static structure"; but somewhat contradictorily, he also calls it "an aleatory fugue," without expanding on that phrase (n.p.). Wood analogizes *John Henry Days* to "a fictional mural of contemporary and historical American life" (30). "Its mode," he writes, "is generally filmic – the rapidity of cutting seems more important than the depth of scenes, as if Whitehead were continually saying to himself, 'Keep it moving, keep it moving!'" (31).[43] Ramsey suggests that "history itself is disassembled into absence" by *John Henry Days*. "Through [Whitehead's] slippery play of social constructions, in which all discourses are constituted more by presuppositions than empirical fact, no core sense of southern essence is left standing […]" (771). Saldívar, finally, reads the mixing of generic forms in Whitehead as part of a "weird kind of realism," a project to "imagine the conditions under which the thing in itself and its phenomenal form might coincide" (14). Together these comments sustain the question whether *John Henry Days* is a repetitive novel, static in virtue of its refusal to move beyond the "mighty

[43] He also writes, "It cannot be said that Whitehead's characters have much depth of life. They are lively [….] But they are awarded little more than the characteristics essential to their roles in the allegory" (31).

monad of its theme" and the stricture of allegory (Wood 31), or whether it is scattered, governed by chance, always moving (too rapidly!) from one scene to the next. The form or formlessness of *John Henry Days*'s own narrative material is up for debate.

Thus far, we have encountered directly only the mountains of stone and "evidence" that John Henry and Guy Johnson drive through. In their resistance to labors of excavation, the mountains exemplify an ontology of extreme withdrawal: nothing of these mountains is given to those who approach them, and the only description we get of the heart of the mountain takes the form of a nightmare. At the other extreme, however, are Godfrey Frank's compendious novel, *A Chiropodist in Pangea*, and the party, pegged by the narration as the "main event," that celebrates *Chiropodist*'s release (323). Here, rather than turn away from the material it might describe, the discourse provides an exhaustive account instead. "They were all there," the narration dares, "from the eminently fuckable to the differently attractive, the not conventionally handsome and the walking airbrushed in complimentary pairs, the critics' darling and the promising newcomer milled about. Miracles abounded in that room" (323). The chief miracle is not so much the unlikely pairing of categorical opposites as the narrative's stipulation that really everyone is crammed into the party. It is a miracle of total givenness, and the narration moves back and forth between the generic and the particular in a dizzying who's-who, punctuated by anecdotal dialogue in which these faceless characters themselves vie to describe Godfrey Frank's unimaginable novel: "It's about the environment" (324); "It's a philosophical treatise in the form of a prose poem" (324); "It's a postmodern retelling of the Midas story – you know, capitalism" (325); "No, it's a memoir" (325); "It's a nonfiction novel"

(326); "In a weird way it's a reinterpretation of *Hamlet*" (327); "It's a masterpiece" (327); and so on. All the speakers of these assessments are clichés rendered as individuals, including a "prodigal son," "a hooker with a heart of gold" and a "substituting *big black guy* when really meaning to say *nigger*" (326, 326, 327, Whitehead's italics). As C. Namwali Serpell argues, we should not think that cliché impedes our access to a scene like this. She suggests, rather, "that the material and affective affordances of [a] heap of clichés enable it to index the unspeakable" (175). These clichés help *John Henry Days*'s narration to give, exactly, its all.

"They were all there," even the dead, it turns out, since J. "had read about a death in the newspaper just that very afternoon" (323). The dream of all-inclusiveness extends from the list of partygoers to J.'s memories of the recently deceased Toure Nkumreh, a former Black Panther who guest-lectures for a semester at J.'s college and who finishes his course with the promise, "In five years you will have forgotten everything I've said" (333). This is a memorable promise that its own content will be forgotten, hence an ironic, self-defeating claim. Yet the narration cites it with a seriousness that both jars and jibes with its narrative context, a party celebrating a "breakout" novel by a famous academic who "shambled through the media like a creature from a science fiction film, a monster whose mutant gigantism he could doubtless locate in nuclear-age anxiety, cold war terror" (327). This is narration half in awe of the authority-by-personality-and-position that it mocks. Godfrey Frank is an apotheosis of academia and of pop at once, a kind of opposite to Nkumreh's self-deprecation: "'I'm the last member of the Black Power Traveling All-Stars,' [Nkumreh] joked, and the lecture hall filled with laughter. The students believed they

had been embraced as intimates" (325). The party scene thus laces the anonymous and the cliché with the intimate and personal. It blends cultural with psychological narrative and quotes from Godfrey Frank's song, "Awestruck Post-Struct Superstar":

Roland Barthes got hit by a truck
That's a signifier you can't duck
Life's an open text
From cradle to death

The satirical mention of Barthes lands with a thud. Obviously it signals a metafictional engagement with structuralist and poststructuralist theory, but is Whitehead taking revenge for "The Death of the Author" by narrating Barthes's death in this text-within-a-text? Or is the truck you can't duck a reminder that even when a machine signifies, it also has another kind of weight? It's the second couplet of this quatrain, however, that sets Godfrey Frank's novel, party, and song at the opposite ontological extreme from the mountains discussed above. If "Life's an open text / From cradle to death," then everything is given, available for access, and also well delimited. Unlike the mountain whose heart one cannot reach or break through, life is an easy given, and death its closure (according to Frank).

Surprisingly, the narrative climax of *John Henry Days* is neither John Henry's race with the steam drill (not narrated) nor J.'s impossible decision whether to get into the cab with Pamela, bound for the airport and New York, or to return to the festival for the unveiling of the stamp (where the reader knows a shooting is about to happen). It is rather this book-release party, narrated at the end of the novel's penultimate part – and not just because it achieves the kind of totalizing description that the narrative elsewhere eschews, but because it takes on the closure of death, from which the

narrative otherwise turns away. If, however, John Henry's mountain represents the extreme of withdrawn form while *A Chiropodist in Pangea* offers the extreme of its givenness, *John Henry Days* as a whole and the nature of its protagonist, J., both remain problematic – their own, mixed versions of the describer's nightmare.

Titled "Adding Verses," the final part of *John Henry Days* makes an ending less by closing down the novel's major narrative lines than by reaffirming the desirability of digressing – of continuing to accumulate narrative. The novel itself ceases to speak, as any finite narrative must do, but rather than capitulating to the narrative logic of character or plot, it exploits the recursive movement of J. and John Henry's labor to hold the termini of their narratives at bay. As I argued above, the John Henry legends and songs don't depict the end of his labor as the completion of the tunnel but divert their energy toward his relatively aimless competition with the steam drill. *John Henry Days* truncates the plot line even sooner, introducing the steam drill and establishing that the contest will take place, but only narrating as far as the end of John Henry's preparation. The novel leaves him in motion toward what we imagine to be his final, fatal labor: "There was no one to hear him but himself. He walked down the road with his hammer in his hand" (386). But for the accretive and digressive logic of *John Henry Days* to hold true, he can never arrive at the contest that is his end.

Similarly, the novel doesn't deliver the end of J.'s work, whether it's writing the story he finds in Talcott or matching and exceeding Bobby Figgis's record. Instead, he becomes an ancillary figure in Pamela Street's narrative, accompanying her on her walk up the mountain to bury her father's ashes and even helping to dig the hole for them. J.'s excavating labor is restrained and temporary: he needn't get to the

mountain's heart, but only deep enough to cover a funerary urn, and afterward he fills the hole back in. Still, the narration makes the comparison with John Henry's type of work explicit:

> It was strange to sit there in the dirt. Their hands moved and moved. He was tired out from this one simple task, and in the same dirt he was feebly scratching into lay dead men who did more back-breaking work in a day than he had done in his whole life. And the legendary John Henry, nearby or not nearby in the ground. He tried to think of what the modern equivalent would be for his story, his martyrdom. But he lived in different times and he could not think of it. He dug some more. (377-378)

As is typical of *John Henry Days*, the narration refuses certain decisions: John Henry's proximity remains a speculation, not a fact, and the narrative thus preserves the necessary distance between J. and him. At the same time, however, the narration exploits the ambiguity of reference that comes from too many pronouns packed together, so that the "he" who "lived in different times" could plausibly be either of the figures under consideration. It is thematically significant that this version of J.'s work happens in tandem with Pamela. As we will see, the novel's most optimistic moments tell of labors pursued side-by-side.

When the narration returns to J. alone, in the final section, it positions him on the verge of a decision that the narration indicates is false: "He stands there with the sun on his face deciding, as if choices are possible" (389). What kind of choice is it, though, that the narrative precludes J. from making? We might imagine the sentence doing no more than mentioning the illusory nature of fictional characters' agency. The point might be simply that J., like any character, cannot decide, because characters are not agents, however convincingly they are realized as products of text and reading. On

my reading, however, J. cannot decide because a decision would tip him into one of the two categories between which the narration has suspended him all along: on the one hand, a fully individuated narrative object with a discoverable form of his own; on the other hand, a kind of paraphrase, a mere index whose form is contingent on whatever John Henry turns out to be. In other words, the provisionality of J.'s labor and of the novel's own are both at stake, and the narration cannot continue through J.'s decision without collapsing the suspension of his categories. After all, the novel concludes in only three more sentences: "She asked one last thing when they came down the mountain. When they came down the mountain [Pamela] asked, what's the J. stand for? He told her" (389). Although this revelation of J.'s name doesn't reach the reader, it threatens to transform his standing, to violate the scheme that has held J.'s narrative somewhere between John Henry's and Godfrey Frank's.

5. J.'s Material, J.'s Labor

"Who is J." or "What is J."? *John Henry Days* is not structured to answer these questions separately but to raise them in tandem, linking what can be learned of his identity with his narratological form. To delve into the question of his identity will result in labor shunted aside by resistant narrative material such as the initial that won't expand into a name. To answer the formal question, however, requires situating J. in relation to the novel's other materials. In Caroline Levine's terms, we might say that the provisional ontology of J. in *John Henry Days* – his form suspended between a legend (John Henry) and a joke (Godfrey Frank) – affords our encounter with the

novel's other, minor characters, to whom I will turn below for an account of excavation's alternative, taxonomy.

First, however, to give a sense of this suspension, it helps to look at how the narration depicts J.'s own labor and to consider how that labor is held apart from his identity. His identity seems to participate in the extreme ontologies of the impenetrable material of the legend or the mountain, in some ways; and in other ways it resembles the repleteness of *A Chiropodist in Pangea*. As distinct from his material, however, J.'s work makes him accessible to criticism. To interpret J., one must work through the descriptions of his labor, even if they seem like digressions.

For J. to complete his labor would be as threatening to the novel's digressive structure as John Henry completing his, so the reader of *John Henry Days* never sees a full story, article, or unit of "content" written by J. Instead, the products of his labor appear in fragments that are also provisional, in a selection of voicemail messages from editors and fact checkers who have not yet finalized his text (232-237). Even so, J., like John Henry (about whom the one consistent detail is that he is a "steel driving man"), is defined more completely by his labor than by anything else, and his unfinished labor invades even his leisure. Walking into Talcott proper from the Talcott Motor Lodge, the morning after nearly choking to death on a piece of prime rib, J. leaves the road (a digression) to make his way down to the river bank:

> Except for the railroad tracks across the river he can't see any sign of civilization. And the silver loop of an old can's pull-top in the sand, but nothing else. Out of the sunlight and in the shade of the trees crouched around the bank, J. feels his body cool and he slips into an even deeper silence, even though the brown river is louder than the empty road. Time out of the world. A little downstream the water blows over a sill of rocks that sends white curtains twisting and twirling. For an instant

> J. sees himself clinging to one of those rocks, but he can't figure out if that momentary image is a scene of final hard-won safety or just a reprieve before the battle for the shore. He has half a mind to sit but decides instead to make an oath, some stentorian declaration of himself and purposes. Isn't that what you do in places like this, among nature, out of the hurly-burly, no one to hear but those who won't tattle: make an oath. Hurl one. Same thing as laying a road or nailing railroad tracks into frigid dirt, that's making an oath too, saying *I am*. And if it was good enough for his hosts this weekend, it is good enough for him, he figures. He is an American, fuck it, he has his Social Security card in his pocket at that very moment. (151-152, Whitehead's italics)

It is strange and wonderful to walk through this would-be bucolic passage, from the supposed absence of "any sign of civilization" on J.'s side of the river to the piece of paper that authorizes J. as a worker and inscribes him in a specifically American system of toil and reward. Along the way, J. seems to be escaping the heat of the road and any notion of urgency with respect to his arrival in Talcott. "Time out of the world" cannot be a time for work. However one parses it ("time-out – of the world" or "time – out-of-the-world") the phrase marks a temporal break in the narration, and it seems possible that in such a digression, the narration will set J.'s labor aside and bring his identity to the fore. Instead, however, "Time out of the world" provides the narrative gap during which J.'s imagination reintroduces the question of work: "[C]linging to one of those rocks," J. has either reached "hard-won" safety or merely rests "before the battle for the shore." Hence, J.'s imagination moves him from a position of unworldly stasis back into a dynamic situation defined by the work that got him there or will get him away. So impossible is leisure that J. can only gather "half a mind to sit" and opts instead to make the oath he equates with manual labor. Either his very presence "among nature, out of the hurly-burly," has been spoiled by this act of imagination, or else the rhetorical question, "Isn't that what you do in places like this,"

leads automatically to the answer (without even a mark of interrogatory punctuation) that what "you" do in the uncivilized American landscape is work: "laying a road or nailing railroad tracks into frigid dirt."[44]

Significantly, this "you" is generic. It extends beyond the question of J.'s identity, and it keeps the passage focused on J.'s labor. The question remains, though, how to read J.'s failure to produce the oath. If one thinks of narrative as appropriately analogized by the laying of tracks, the setting out of plot, the generation of momentum, and so on, then J.'s inability to generate the oath that would do such work becomes an ironic and anti-narrative response to what the situation calls for:

> He can't think of anything. He gives it a full five minutes and he decides to take a piss instead.
>
> He takes one last look and clambers up the dirt. He approaches town and whistles without recognition the tune he heard at dinner the night before. (152)

The narrator might be mocking J., whose quest to overtake Bobby Figgis's record of consecutive days junketeering amounts to little more than being the king of moochers. Or possibly the narration implicitly laments the failure of this writer to come up with the right words at a moment when he wants to define his ambition in personal, rather than commercial, terms. If instead, however, one accepts the digressive narrative logic of *John Henry Days*, then one can see how the narrative's refusal of the definitive oath is necessary to the plot's continuation. For if J. were to succeed in producing his "declaration of himself and purposes," the suspension of his ontological status between recalcitrant material and open form might collapse.

[44] The "white curtains twisting and twirling" also suggest a heavy symbolic reading of this passage, in which J.'s (racially) white surroundings are responsible for depriving him of the possibility of leisure.

The passage under examination here passes from J.'s vision of a landscape without signs of civilization into his impulse to reenact American expansionism by (metaphorically) building a road or laying track, and this movement hinges on J.'s sudden vision of himself clinging to a rock sill in the middle of the river. Here again is a nexus of story and stone: the rock sill, a stable object amid the river's flow, inspires J. to attempt a "declaration of himself and purposes," a statement that would inscribe and expose his aims. Yet the equivalencies that J. constructs here return us to the construction of his identity through labor and labor's systems rather than through his own material being: "make an oath. Hurl one. Same thing as laying a road or nailing railroad tracks into frigid dirt, that's making an oath too, saying *I am*." Hurling the oath that J. imagines is the "same thing" as extending an infrastructural network; presumably the equivalence lies in the road's or track's determination of destination across formerly undirected (and resistant, "frigid") ground. J.'s failure to produce the oath thus holds him right at the edge of involvement in such a project. It distinguishes him from John Henry's *total* definition via labor ("steel driving man" is his epithet), and yet the Social Security card shows that J. is at least provisionally inscribed in labor's networks.

"*I am*" is also the statement that "was good enough for his hosts this weekend." J.'s inability to come up with an oath might be read as a brief exemption from his definition by economic contribution to the American project. But it is also and more powerfully a failure to assert that he is *anything*, even at the moment in which he imagines a commonality with his hosts. Hence, there is the potential for something tragic in J.'s blankness here, which the narration averts by truncating the moment of

reflection with a literal evacuation. With empty bladder and empty mind (failing even to recognize the tune he whistles), J. climbs back to the road. The point is not only that the narrative resumes by digression as J. returns to his unfinished work, but that J. remains the character whose material the narrative won't define. The condition of his ongoing labor is something like an annihilation of individual context. Who or what is J. Sutter, then? The kind of character who sets out to produce mere web content, but along the way starts "kidding about [a] story" and eventually finds that he "has a story but it is not the one he planned" (387). J. is shunted from scene to scene no less than a reader of *John Henry Days*, and when at last he winds up with a story on his hands, the novel finds itself at a close.

6. Narrative Minority and the Taxonomic Impulse

At this stage of the analysis, it is possible finally to introduce taxonomy as the model of labor *John Henry Days* proposes as an alternative to excavation. John Henry and Guy Johnson, as we have seen, make no progress so long as they drive themselves against mountainous content. J., meanwhile, is so shaped by the novel's digressive logic that despite his inability to experience leisure, he also can never really begin to work. Like John Henry, J. appears most clearly in motion when his energy is diverted into a competition that only simulates work: J. competes for Bobby Figgis's record; John Henry challenges the steam drill to a race. Johnson reminds us meanwhile that "we make our own machines and devise our own contests." This logic of digression partially accounts for why *John Henry Days* keeps switching among its various narratives: it cannot afford to run aground on the fact of John Henry's existence or

non-existence, and it must find a way both to incorporate and to move beyond some of the verses and versions in which the John Henry legend has been told since the late 1800s.[45] But while the logic of digression explains the multiplicity of narrative threads, another logic is needed to keep their multiplication in check, and that is the logic of taxonomy, the effort to classify and systematize the narrative material that keeps accumulating. The novel that contains everything is a fantasy or illusion. Like *A Chiropodist in Pangea*, it can be named and described in some abstraction, but it cannot actually be written. So while *John Henry Days* displays its own impulses toward encyclopedism – consequently drawing comparisons to DeLillo's *Underworld* and David Foster Wallace's maximalism[46] – it also enlists various minor characters' narratives to counterbalance the logics of digression and accretion with the work of classification. Joan Acorn, an intern for the *Charleston Daily Mail*, is one such taxonomizing figure, and I will also discuss Pamela Street's temp work for a "content-driven interactive information provider," before turning to the narrative, digressive, and taxonomic functions of "the List" and the junketeers' "anatomy of puff" (287, 70).

In its simplest form, taxonomy in *John Henry Days* enables narrative discourse in the face the otherwise unsayable. This is what happens when Acorn invokes the basics of journalistic taxonomy to structure her thoughts after a gunman opens fire at

[45] One might separately make the argument that *John Henry Days*'s digressive logic can be attributed to its tackling a myth, *per se*. In *Mythologies*, Barthes claims that myths constitutes a "second-order semiological system" that flattens pre-existing signs into mere signifiers that it arranges in a new signifying "chain." As a result "Everything happens as if myth shifted the formal system of the first significations sideways" (113). Myths have a digressive logic of their own in so far as they shunt preexisting signifying operations (themselves narrative in form, as a signifier points to or connects with a signified in order to become a sign) perpetually to the side.

[46] See, for example, Walonen (77) and Wood. This is indeed Wood's opening position: "So it has happened. *Underworld*, the most diffusely influential American novel of recent years, has begun to deliver nameable kin" (30).

the John Henry Days stamp ceremony. "She thinks, where, what, who, these are the essential questions a journalist must ask herself" and proceeds to deliver her report to the editor on the other end of the phone line (26). Naming herself as a journalist has allowed the intern to approach and interview witnesses before she makes the call, although she is also a witness herself. Separately, the "essential" journalistic questions help her to reclassify the scene as an object of reportage. Taxonomy thus gives Joan Acorn two levels of descriptive access, but it is important that we not confuse description with objectivity. As Ramsey points out, Acorn's "perception of events is [...] 'nutty'" and her descriptions are factually in error (782). But I take issue with Ramsey's characterization that Acorn's journalism is no good and that "she reports on the stylish seduction of surfaces" (*ibid*.). As the narration reminds us, "The witnesses share what they have seen and fit their perspectives into one narrative through a system of sobbing barter. In these first few minutes a thousand different stories collide; this making of truth is violence too, out of which facts are formed" (24). Like John Henry's steel driving, Acorn's taxonomic work "is violence," and she herself does not entirely escape tears. Nor does her reportage escape the described system of barter: her individual work is designed for publication, and the discourse she produces comes out "in someone else's voice," evidence that the process of classification has affected the classifier, too (26). Joan is both agent and object, actively involved with her content and consequently changing as she performs her taxonomic work.

Pamela Street's temp work at an unnamed internet company similarly enmeshes her in layers of taxonomic flux. The "new media" company is stuck in the old media age because Technology Services is late delivering the "Tool" (there are still

"glitches" to be worked out) (287). As a "bigwig" at the company puts it to Street and her co-workers,

> Your job […] is ontology. With millions of websites out there, a newbie will need a reliable source to tip them on where to go. Where they can find things that might interest them, discount diaper retailers or aluminum pliers. The ontologists classify websites into root categories such as Entertainment, News, and Health, categories recognizable to many from the real world, and write descriptions of no more than thirty-five words. (287)

Here, "newbies" are distinguished from experienced internet users in a speech to brand new hires. This paradoxically positions Street, who "had never been on the internet before coming to work there" as both beginner and expert (289). The bigwig also hypes a coming transformation in the ontological work itself: "The present database was fine for the average business but not for a new media company such as theirs. It was cumbersome. It was obsolete, dodo bird in this new world. Awkward fields, counterintuitive commands" (287-88). When the new database is rolled out, the awkward fields will be replaced by ones "specifically designed for the needs of ontology," and the Tool "will publish their ontology directly on the web" (288). "But until Technology delivered the new Tool, he continue[s]," in a passage that balances the novel's taxonomic logic with its habit of tending towards an event that hasn't happened yet, "they would need all the bodies they could get. Have fun with it, he added, and left the room" (288). Thus, for all that taxonomy enables discourse, the bigwig poises his company, and the ontologists' labor, in a liminal zone between categories. A transformative event is on the way or in the works; in a certain sense it is totally known (the bigwig can say what the Tool will do when it comes); and yet the

fact that it isn't yet manifest somehow reduces the workers to "bodies" who must perform a lot of necessary, if boring, ontological labor in the meantime.

To add one more ingredient to the taxonomic mix, the narration offers a glimpse of how these workers' personal lists contrast with their work for the company. Together, the ontological scheme that should organize the internet ("Entertainment, News, and Health," etc.) and the one that governs the labor ("bodies" vs. "the Tool") represent a stricture from which, peculiarly, the appearance of wipeboards in the open-plan office space ("the Box") seems to release the human workers. At first Pamela doesn't understand everyone's excitement,

> but once she saw how the rest of the team hurried to write in red or green or blue their to-do lists, she realized that a void had been filled. The wipeboards were like a little bubble of hope inside each person that they had been unaware of. They made charts on the wipeboards, some people just lists, and when an item had been achieved, it was crossed out or wiped away. In some ways these to-do lists were the only outward markers of the progress made each day. Everything else was held tight by the database in cells, rows, columns. (289-90)

The tight grip of the database speaks to how a fixed or completed taxonomy threatens to cut the human workers off from narrative possibility ("progress"), even as the personal, changeable charts and lists that people put on their wipeboards speak to a more flexible aspect of taxonomizing labor. Certainly it is ironic that these workers reproduce the form of their wage labor within their "little bubble[s] of hope" and that only a gift from their employer makes that hope perceptible to them. Furthermore, Street's initial indifference to the wipeboards thickens the irony, as does her admiration for the company's tireless bots, the "lines of code that prowled the internet […] searching for keywords of interest to each team's area of ontology" (289). Finally,

the resemblance between John Henry's eventual replacement by the steam drill and Street's replacement by the Tool is inescapable. I want to emphasize, however, that John Henry's legend comes from the steel driving he performs just opposite the machine, as Pamela herself works alongside and admires the "tireless bots." The novel's pairing of human and machine labor situates excavation and taxonomy in proximity to one another and in a state of awaiting improvement or perfection to come. In the meantime, driving into material unexpectedly generates digressions, while taxonomic juxtaposition surprisingly facilitates narrative progress. This is the balance that the narration of *John Henry Days* repeatedly strikes.

The cleanest and also the messiest example of taxonomy and digression at work together in *John Henry Days* is "the List," an object sometimes so inflated by narratorial description that it resembles a spiritual power, but at other times so circumscribed that it denotes no more than a computer file and its backup copy. "The List possessed a will and function" (55); "The List pondered the faces of itself and reached out" (55); "The List was just" (55); "The List had been pushed from the earth by tectonic forces" (56); "The List was aware of those in its charge" (56); "And the List rewarded the world" (56). These six sentences, which begin six consecutive paragraphs, make the List seem autonomous, self-aware, moral, natural, omniscient, and benign, but for all this, in other terms, "The intent of the List is to have a reliable group of people on call who don't give a fuck, who want things for free" (136). These are the junketeers, people who show up at publicity events on someone else's dime, receive meals, drinks, and various products for free, and actually write up stories often enough that they remain in good standing with the List's proprietor, Lucien. How one

sees the List depends on what one uses it for and on the possibility of altering its contents, and *John Henry Days* puts the List at the center of a subplot concerning editorial access, as One Eye conspires to get off the List and J. aspires, in a certain way, to transcend it. Hence, like the mountain, the List is an obstacle and an enabler, its content resistant to alteration, even if it is not perfectly fixed. For J., then, the List resembles a mountain, while One Eye considers it a "machine to beat," metaphorically equating it with the Burleigh steam drill and with the record that J. is pursuing (236). The List, a dynamic object of veneration and revilement, thus unites John Henry, One Eye, and J. thematically and contributes uniquely to the novel's balance between taxonomic and digressive logics, the former productive of its own enabling forms, the latter a result of thwarted excavation.

One Eye explains his desire to delete himself from the List as a question of symbolism: "It's not about willpower. It's beyond willpower. Deleting my name has a symbolic power that will sustain my decision," he says, when J. first suggests that if One Eye wants to change his life, he "could always not go" to the publicity events (126). One Eye's point is that, as the narration has already articulated, the List represents the functioning of the whole pop culture:

> The great ebb and flow of need, chronicled, subscribed to. A comeback. A meteoric rise. A next big thing, jostling for position in a year-end double issue. The reclusive author breaks her silence and grants interviews to justify her grandiose advance. The precocious upstart seen at the right parties. Behind the scenes at the award ceremony. The triumphant return. The inner life of. The secret world. The stories were told. There was a need. The List facilitated. (55)

In passages like this, *John Henry Days* simultaneously classifies and concatenates, names and describes. The "need" mentioned at the passage's beginning and end is

perhaps specified (detailed) by the list of events beginning with "A comeback." Yet there is no syntactic cue to read this way, and the end-punctuated phrases that form a series never refer to one another. Nothing but "need" recurs, and no pronoun finds an earlier antecedent. No place and no time unify the successive syntactic units. Phenomena like "A comeback," "a meteoric rise," and "A next big thing" have parallel structure, and they seem to issue demands for attention (especially the last one, "jostling for position"). But the narration lists them right along with an event described in quite different terms: "The reclusive author breaks her silence and grants interviews." In the shift from the indefinite to the definite article ("a" to "the"), which coincides with the shift from a fragmentary noun-phrase to a narrative sentence, the passage performs taxonomic work at one level while creating a need for it at another. Assuring us that "[t]he stories were told" and asserting that "[t]he List facilitated," the narration challenges the critic to find the unstated connection between these statements. But it also names the List as the facilitating key.

The figure of the List blends the story-telling mechanisms of pop culture and publicity with a mechanism of categorization. The people on List are mustered to get the story out, but they also actively debate the "Anatomy of Puff." They consider the virtues of the original three-way breakdown of genres, "Bob's Debut, Bob Returns, and Bob's Comeback," versus the value of the fourth mode of puff, "Bob is Hip," and the possibility of adopting a fifth mode, "Bob's Alive" (70). However broad or narrow the taxonomic scheme, "[e]ach manifestation [of Bob] commanded its own distinct stock phrases and hyperbolic rhetoric" (70). In other words, the kind of Bob (a generic pop figure) under consideration by the writer determines the rhetorical elements that

the writer will deploy. For writers of puff, this just means that the task of meeting a required word count is streamlined, but it is not difficult to see in literary theory and interpretation a comparably dynamic, self-critical discipline.

Earlier I promised to modify my formulation of the question whether form is objective or relative. In the context of *John Henry Days*'s digressive and taxonomic impulses and its depictions of both extraction and categorization, then, I suggest that both formulations err in imagining a text's simple givenness. The first half of this is easy to see. If we imagine that form is objective, then we imagine that it is *just there* in the text. It is harder to see, but equally the case, that imagining form as relative to the critic or reader indulges in a fantasy of givenness. For if form were provided by the critic, then the text itself must be thought of as an undifferentiated, that is *formless*, content: *tohu va'vohu* ("formless and void"), like the mere stuff, not yet even material, that precedes creation (*Genesis* 1:1). While these reciprocal fantasies of givenness color some of Best and Marcus's 2009 accounts of "Surface Reading,"[47] the present empiricist turn in the humanities actually emphasizes relation: Latour's actor-network theory conceives of objects always in relation to their makers, users, and social and material contexts. Similarly in a certain way, Graham Harman's metaphysically realist object-oriented philosophy "is a method of exploring *gaps* between objects and their components, objects and their appearances, objects and their relations, or objects and their qualities" ("Outline" 193, Harman's italics). Here, I have modeled my emphasis on labor in *John Henry Days* to coincide in the end with this assessment that the

[47] "Surface reading's advocacy of neutrality, of 'minimal critical agency,' of 'objectivity, validity, [and] truth,'[70] involves a fantasy of stepping outside the subject altogether," in the worlds of Carolyn Lesjak (247).

critical and interpretive labor best suited to Whitehead's novel is that which acknowledges and replays book's own efforts to taxonomize provisionally what it lacks the scope entirely to contain.

The novel itself contains plenitudes as well as multitudes. In *John Henry Days*, the whole unwieldy organization of pop is on the table; and, as the novel dramatizes, the structures of pop can consume those who give themselves over to it entirely, like Bobby Figgis. It's a struggle, too, to keep pop at an ironic distance, as the remaining junketeers try to do. New categories of puff might have presented a welcome opportunity to the junketeering class, but as Tiny points out, particularizing a taxonomy has diminishing returns, and too many new categories will destabilize the entire taxonomic edifice:

> "See what I'm talking about?" Tiny thunders, spraying droplets of a substance from his beard like a dog shaking off rain. "You could make a case for Talcott as Debut, Comeback or Return or Hip. It's all jumbled up now. I'm accustomed to four varieties of puff and I like it like that. Four elements, four humors, four seasons, four varieties of puff. Otherwise why have categories at all? Why not make everything a category. A puff for every little thing." (74)

Tiny implies here that the point of taxonomy is a degree of abstraction, and he is right to observe that the highest level of taxonomic inclusivity would be a complete catalogue that no longer served any organizing purpose. *A Chiropodist in Pangea*, discussed earlier, seems to exemplify such an all-encompassing tome, and in Whitehead's description of the book release party, Godfrey Frank's hugeness is a horror: "It Came from Academia: Frank shambled through the media like a creature from a science fiction film, a monster whose mutant gigantism he could doubtless locate in nuclear-age anxiety, cold war terror" (327). At the other extreme, however, is

the total failure to specify, which the narration invokes with the insipid phrase, "droplets of a substance," but which is also exemplified in the novel by whatever appears (however temporarily) impenetrable – the mountain, the "contents" of Pamela's box that go so long unnamed, and even John Henry and J.

It is illustrative that what draws Tiny to four varieties of puff, rather than the original three, has nothing to do with efficiency or logical structure. It is, rather, the rhythmic and aesthetic form of four-ness: "Four elements, four humors, four seasons, four varieties of puff." The sentence itself is a list and a sort of meta-taxonomy of the conditions of Tiny's comfort. Perhaps a taxonomic scheme, however wrought and however justified, ought to be recognizable by its similarity to other known schemes. Although Tiny doesn't exactly win the argument, his appeal to a taxonomic scheme's aesthetic foundation resonates with One Eye, who, as this debate among the junketeers winds down, first confides in J. about his plan to take himself off the List. By such juxtapositions, *John Henry Days* bridges the distance between the minutiae of its dialogue and the shape of its plot. The List makes (digressive) story space for J., One Eye, and the other junketeers in the same gesture that it makes a discursive space for (taxonomic) theory.

7. Provisional Conclusions and Ontography

The List's capacity to hold the sprawling *John Henry Days* together makes the most sense when understood as a dynamic object produced simultaneously by Lucien and by the junketeers themselves, whose relations to one another and their own writing practices give meaning to the form (the mere table of names) that Lucien has

the power to edit. The List is a discursive object that is also produced through the actions of characters in *John Henry Days*'s story. As such it is the kind of object toward which flat narratology is designed to draw attention; flat narratology might synthesize the descriptive bent of longstanding narratological projects with the "ontographic" practice that Ian Bogost distills from object-oriented philosophy. Kate Marshall characterizes ontography as an "an alternative inscriptive strategy to narrative," but if novels are putting ontography to use, then narrative theory also needs to make a place for its operations. Moreover, as my reading of *John Henry Days* suggests, a novel can mobilize taxonomy as a narrative operation that draws together characters, settings, and plots that in traditional narratological terms are only juxtaposed.

Distinct views of the ontology of literary form undergird different positions in the ongoing debates over critique, specifically, and the role of humanistic inquiry more broadly. I suggest that speculative realist philosophy and Latourian network analysis provide generative models for how to navigate narratives whose internal connections work at heterogeneous and widely divergent scales. If we want narratological readings that not only advance narrative theory, but also offer compelling accounts of the particular texts with which they engage, then it is helpful to note the directions those texts indicate and, in a way, to test texts' narrative devices by doing them over.[48] My goal in narrativizing the taxonomies of *John Henry Days* is not to do over what the novel already does, but to extrapolate a more general narratological approach from its delicate handling of J. and J.'s deferred work. Like Tiny, whose preferred anatomy of

[48] My language here has a precedent in Saldívar's analysis of *John Henry Days*'s "doing" race (2).

puff rings true to him on aesthetic grounds, I have tried to define a scale or scope of contact that is descriptive, interpretive, and particular – that touches, works, and moves (on).[49]

Conclusions about J. are just what the novel heads off by refusing to give his full name, even when he gives it to Pamela Street. Although his trip to Talcott creates a central plot line, J. is mostly excluded from the novel's digressive and taxonomic logics, left hanging between the over-read John Henry and the un-read (but much described) content of *A Chiropodist in Pangea.* We can say, however, that J.'s labor is transformed when he puts his hands in the dirt beside Street and helps to bury her father's ashes in the same graveyard where John Henry's remains might lie. No longer only striving to produce content, J. moves the following morning to an open space and a more reflective work: "The yellow paint that had divided the asphalt into parking places has been scratched away. There are no dividers anymore. Just open space out on the black tar. J. Sutter stands in the open lot trying to decide" (388). The narration later denies J. this choice, but the effort itself still signifies. The narration leaves J. trying to chart the kind of middle ground that he has occupied (without knowing it) all along, and this effort to decide models the impossibility of assimilating everything one could want into a critical or interpretive model. It is essential to my reading of *John Henry*

[49] Is there a surprise at the end of *JHD*? In keeping with Rooney's account of surprise in reading, the surprise may have the form of the pleasure of recounting in new terms how the novel unfolds itself. But perhaps this surprise belongs to criticism, rather than to the novel. The novel itself, instead, may offer something like an open secret (on Anne Lise Francois's model), a knowledge of J. Sutter that doesn't even need to be spoken out loud. Isn't it obvious that J. stands for "John," the name both of the famous Sutter by whose mill gold was discovered in 1848 and – of course – of John Henry.

Days that its narrative logics are provisional, dynamic, even dialectical.[50] Still more importantly, they flatly reject the hierarchy of character, setting, and plot by which narrative content is usually organized. *John Henry Days* ends with a valiant effort to insulate its protagonist from the violence of having said too much. The novel sprawls, but only until the moment of decision arrives, when it falls silent. The remaining interpretive challenge, then, is to handle this withdrawal of J. from before our eyes – and the novel is teaching us how.

[50] See Carolyn Lesjak's "Reading Dialectically," a scathing rebuttal of "surface reading," for a fuller account of how ontological extremes might be held in tension.

Chapter 3 – "The Hidden Thinness of Everything": Quotation, Performance, and the Tenuousness of Attribution in *The Body Artist*

1. Introduction

At the very beginning of Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist*, "Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments […]" (9). The narration thus promises from its opening sentences that time moves (or doesn't move) deceptively; the novel also very succinctly introduces a concern it shares with Atwood's *Cat's Eye* over the spatialization (here "unrolling") of time. As we saw in Chapter 1, *Cat's Eye*'s promise that "Time is not a line but a dimension, like the dimensions of space" belongs to a voice that the narration abandons almost immediately (Atwood 3). For all its apparent authority, then, the statement fails to lay out *Cat's Eye*'s physical or metaphysical premises, and *Cat's Eye*'s various accounts of how time works lead instead to reflections on the novel's frameworks for viewing. In *The Body Artist*, as in *Cat's Eye*, the narration very soon abandons the voice in which it opens, but in this novel the voice returns farther on, though briefly, at the starts of chapters 2, 6, and 7. Also the opening statements of *The Body Artist* are not, like *Cat's Eye*'s, limited in their scope by attribution explicitly to a character. Consequently, *The Body Artist*'s opening gambit of time's seeming is not explicitly refuted by the narration. If "Time seems to pass" were to establish this novel's metaphysical groundwork, the question would not be, as in *Cat's Eye*, "What framework can sustain examinations of a life or lives?," but rather "What kind of seeming does time perform, and which features of this fictional world sustain it?"

In this chapter I proceed as though *The Body Artist* were indeed speaking for and about itself in the opening paragraph (which I will shortly discuss in detail). This premise leads me to examine the poetics and temporality of quotation as it appears within the narrative discourse and disrupts it. I define quotation quite broadly here: Any language in the discourse of *The Body Artist* whose origin supposedly lies within the story-world counts.[51] Quotation thus includes character speech (monologue, including interior monologue, and dialogue), story-world documents (an obituary and a review of a work of performance art), and the self-citational language that *The Body Artist* uses to warp the world it constructs, transporting the narration from one time and place to another and even allowing characters to inhabit multiple scenes at once. Taking up the poetics of quotation in advance of considering the poetics of character or plot in *The Body Artist* draws attention to the narration's own minimally descriptive approach to its narrative objects; and it contrasts that minimal description ("thin" description, in terms Heather Love adapts from Clifford Geertz) with the relatively "thick," interpretive speculations offered by *The Body Artist*'s protagonist, Lauren Hartke. This, in turn, highlights those aspects of the novel that inhibit – or, conversely, facilitate – naturalization, the process by which readers and critics "explain [something's] meaning by treating it as the natural effect of an unexceptionable cause" (Culler, *Pursuit* 152).[52]

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[51] The breadth of this definition relies on Derrida's idea that "[e]very sign […], in a small or large unit, can be *cited*, put between quotation marks; in so doing it can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts in a manner which is absolutely illimitable" (*Limited Inc.* 12, qtd. in Lee 43).

[52] See also the back and forth between Monika Fludernik (*Towards a 'Natural' Narratology*) and "unnatural narratologists" such as Brian Richardson and Jan Alber. These debates over how to handle "the non- or anti-memetic in narrative" are now a decade old but the stakes of the debate remain high

As in previous chapters, my approach here involves selecting and organizing narrative discourse in unconventional ways; but as in Chapters 1 and 2, I ground these selections in close readings of the text's metafictional self-commentary. Beside asserting a spatialized temporality for *The Body Artist*, the opening passage also indicates the novel's concerns with performance, identity, and (perversely, given the title) disembodiment – all in advance of introducing its characters. Here is the opening paragraph in full:

> Time seems to pass. The world happens, unrolling into moments, and you stop to glance at a spider pressed to its web. There is a quickness of light and a sense of things outlined precisely and streaks of running luster on the bay. You know more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness. The wind makes a sound in the pines and the world comes into being, irreversibly, and the spider rides the wind-swayed web. (9).

In contrast with the enigmatic first sentence and the strangeness, the difficulty, of "your" stopping to glance at a spider in the second, the third sentence's abrupt turn to impersonal, even objective, description stands out. The "quickness of light" and the "sense of things outlined precisely" are external and disembodied, grammatically unattached to any real or fictive subjectivity. Perhaps because of this, the statement of your knowing "more surely who you are on a strong bright day after a storm when the smallest falling leaf is stabbed with self-awareness" has the ring of a cosmic principle (rather than a personal one) linking your self-knowledge to the leaf's self-awareness. Read narrowly, in isolation from the narrative contexts that may eventually enclose

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(Fludernik, "How Unnatural" (358)). The question is whether narrative analysis has to be (or can be) in the business of interpreting "unnatural" narrative discourse by mapping it onto "natural" forms, or whether, instead, narrative "oddity" can be preserved and embraced by narratology (361). My own analysis is largely sympathetic with the unnatural narratologists, but if Fludernik is right to imply that they tried, but failed, to "resist interpretation," I part ways with them there (*ibid.*).

them, these pairings of light's quickness with "a sense of things" and your own self-knowledge with a leaf's may disclose the ontology of the story-world. It would be a world in which perception and knowledge are implicitly, immediately connected, maybe causing each other. And yet, time's "seeming" undermines the links that the narration would otherwise establish: If time only seems to pass, then the strong bright day may be somewhere one never arrives, except by passing one's eyes over that very sentence. So the discourse here both describes the world whose objects, images, and relations it names *and* calls attention to how that world, made just so by just this language, is illusory. There is "a quickness of light" because the discourse says so; and having been alerted that I know more surely who I am "on a strong bright day after a storm," I may even be inclined to feel this way if such a strong bright day arrives; but time only seems to pass in the world described, because it is fixed by this narration. Thus *The Body Artist* very economically initiates its self-commentary. Even the falling leaf is "stabbed": arrested, transfixed, and subject to examination.

Still, there is no doubt that *The Body Artist* can be read quite straightforwardly with human characters, their language, and their psychology at the center of the story, instead of quotation's disruptiveness to the world-making function of discourse. The novel's main action occurs in the days and weeks after the suicide of Lauren Hartke's husband, Rey Robles, and it follows Hartke, the body artist of the title, as she develops a new performance. It is easy enough, then, to make headway into the novel by psychologizing its experimental narration and recuperating its occasionally bent diegesis into a realist mode. One need only read the weirdest or most unwieldy elements of the fictional world as metaphors for loss or grief, and the opening

paragraph would simply articulate Hartke's point of view in advance. Its apparently cosmic utterances would constitute Hartke's early morning insights on the morning before her husband shoots himself. The unusual conjunctions ("the world happens […] *and* you stop"; "there is a quickness […] *and* a sense"; "The wind makes a sound […] *and* the world comes into being") wouldn't explore the ontology of this or any world. Rather, they would share the contours of Hartke's affective landscape.

Such a reading, however, is deflationary. It undersells the novel's self-commentary and might demote the two story-world documents that *The Body Artist* imports from their formal positions as chapter equivalents. Their easy resemblance to real-world documents also doesn't help a reading oriented toward Hartke's interiority. More importantly, two of *The Body Artist*'s characters, Hartke and Mr. Tuttle, possess such uncanny imitative abilities that they transform before the reader's eyes into other people and thereby sever their utterances from the temporal and spatial contexts in which they are produced. So, in lay terms, the critical problem of *The Body Artist* is to figure out just how weird one should take the novel to be. Do its spare prose and its non-attribution of certain phrases make it only difficult to read – requiring some care and imagination in order to make sense of the novel's events in a naturalistic way? Or is the novel itself a performance of a different kind, not one whose plot one has to work harder than usual to reconstruct, but one that isn't plotted in customary terms at all?

Consider Mr. Tuttle, who first appears after Robles's death but whose voice and language recall Robles and other characters to the present. His strange speech violates the bounds of time and of identity, disrupting Hartke's efforts to make sense

of him, his past, her past, her husband's death, and her grief. Laura Di Prete, in "Don DeLillo's 'The Body Artist': Performing the Body, Narrating Trauma," acknowledges that "the reader is doomed to fail in an effort to decode or fully explain such a figure" (484). However, by reading Mr. Tuttle as an intrusive "phantom," borrowing the term from Nicolas Abraham, she emphasizes his production in Hartke of a "heterogeneous" subjectivity (485). Mark Osteen and Joseph Dewey, like Di Prete, focus on Tuttle's impacts on Hartke, exploring her artistic production and her grieving, respectively; and when David Cowart takes up the topic of "DeLillo and the Power Language," he reads Tuttle as "a vehicle for a number of enigmatic revelations about language *as environment*" (157, italics added).

It is also possible, however, to read this novel the other way around: not as the story of a performance artist who wrestles with the intrusive or uncanny language of her environment, but as the story of a story realizing itself in words – of language that calls into being, however temporarily, such characters as Mr. Tuttle, Robles, and Hartke herself with their complex temporal and personal relations. In pursuit of such a reading, I begin by investigating the distortions caused by quoted discourse in narratological terms. Section (2) defines these terms and argues for quotation's consistent generation of a present tense in narrative discourse. Section (3) takes up the implications of that analysis for *The Body Artist*'s experimental deployment of certain repeated phrases, and Section (4) offers an account, via Heather Love, of how such a flat (or maybe "thin") reading of the novel might be "hidden." Section (5) extrapolates further from Love's advocacy of thin description in the humanities to explain the appearance of *The Body Artist*'s two interpolated documents, which I take as

quotations of story-world discourse that also do characterological work; and I conclude in Section (6) by returning from the topic of "documentary metafiction" to the topic of time with which the novel and my reading both begin. Quotation's special status motivates both *The Body Artist*'s fragmented narration and the peculiarity of its anti-mimetic or "unnatural" characters. Even though the narrative contains loss and grief, the novel's critical and philosophical work concern the mechanics of representation. With this in mind, it might be appropriate to say that Hartke's loss of Robles is a metaphor for the unmooring that enables and accompanies quotation, rather than the other way around.

2. On Quotation's Temporality

Quotation has a special temporal status and a special ontological status in fiction generally, as I will illustrate in a moment. When *The Body Artist* violates the conventions of quotation, though, it makes the timing and ontology of quoted language (and gesture) into the subject of a specifically narratological concern about how characters are composed. When Hartke begs Mr. Tuttle, "Do Rey," she is asking for quotation: "[s]ay whatever comes into your head, just so it is him" (73). And Hartke's own transformations rely on quotation, too – of gesture as well as language. *The Body Artist*'s self-reflexive narration not only uses, but is also about, the distortions quotation can cause.

My theoretical framing of quotation as a discrete narrative object relies on the observation – indeed the insistence – of Gérard Genette that narrative discourse is not in the business of mimesis (representing) but of "informing." This insistence

appropriately permits separate analyses of the temporality of a narrated story's events and the temporality of the narrative discourse. Accounts of story time can specify how long events take in the story-world, how often they recur, and whether they belong in the past or the present relative to the central, ongoing action of the main narrative line (if there is one). Analyzing the temporality of the discourse is either much simpler or much more complex. On the one hand, "discourse time" itself is typically measured by the number and length of words, although one might also count syllables or consider the discourse's metrical aspects. On the other hand, to make the temporality of the discourse signify, one must consider discourse time and story time together: Genette calls the relation between them "duration." When the discourse covers a long time in a few words, we can call it "summary"; when the timing of the telling and the timing of the told event are (by some measure) similar, Genette (and Seymour Chatman, following him) calls this "scene." Discourse can also linger longer than the event that it relates ("stretch") or even bring the flow of time in a narrative text completely to a halt, as in pure description.[53]

Genette wants to do away with the idea of mimesis when it comes to "verbal acts." In his words, "Narrative does not 'represent' a (real or fictive) story, it *recounts* it – that is, it signifies it by means of language – except for the *already verbal* elements of the story (dialogues, monologues). And these, too, it does not imitate – not, certainly, because here it cannot, but simply because it need not, since it can directly reproduce them, or more precisely, transcribe them" (42-43, Genette's

[53] For examples of cutting-edge work on description, see Freedgood and Schmitt's "Denotatively, Technically, Literally"; Schmitt's "Tidal Conrad (Literally)"; and Love's "Close but not deep: literary ethics and the descriptive turn."

italics).[54] Genette thus marks out dialogue as a special case. It differs from other narrative elements in virtue of being a transcription of language that has its basis, Genette might like to say, in the language of the characters, but is made to appear *just so* at the surface of the narrative. As I indicated in my Introduction, and as I argue in my analysis of *John Henry Days*, this imagined priority of story elements or story materials over the discourse in which they appear (whether by transcription, mimesis, or reference), cannot be sustained with respect to contemporary metafictions, if it can be sustained anywhere. Culler's deconstruction of the story/discourse divide already casts doubt on the possibility of treating story stuff as prior. I hesitate to follow Culler's conclusion, however, that despite the reversibility of the story/discourse hierarchy, which narrative's self-deconstruction entails, "one must be willing to shift from one perspective to the other, from story to discourse and back again," in order to "account for the force of narrative" (*Pursuit* 208). Rather, I want to test the idea that metafictions like *The Body Artist* benefit from readings that avoid asserting a necessary gap between story and discourse, since so much of their stories are made of the discourse itself. The potential for such discourse-heavy stories is implicit in Genette's account of dialogue as transcription, which I extend to quotation more broadly. The transcription model of quotation suggests the power of a certain class

[54] Despite Genette's formulation, narrative discourse does sometimes imitate a character's verbal acts. This, anyhow, is one way of accounting for the relationship between narratorial discourse and free indirect discourse. There is also a more general problem that aesthetically realist narratives routinely quote character speech in such a polished form that it does not resemble real (i.e., flesh-and-blood, real-world) speech. If we assume that the characters in such fiction are supposed to be as much like real people as possible, then there is an argument to be made that such quotation is actually a form of paraphrase rather than a direct reproduction. My own view tends in a rather different direction: I take narratorial statements about what characters say to be stipulative, to constitute the facts about the story-world.

story elements (linguistic ones) to appear directly in the discourse. Significantly for my reading of *The Body Artist*, when narratorial discourse quotes, its power to compress or dilate time or otherwise to mediate a reader's encounter with story material is restrained. It is not that this story stuff is prior, nor that it actually comes from anywhere different than the narratorial discourse, but that the form in which it appears in the discourse is the same form it has in the story.

Thus, if we think of certain verbal information as "transcribed" from the language of a character, then quotation becomes a unit or an object that belongs so completely to the story that its appearance has the potential to rupture the discourse.[55] Through the break it makes in the narrative discourse, a quotation erupts into the reader's real life: a linguist artifact that remains self-identical no matter how often it is reproduced and no matter how one modifies its context.[56] Of course, calling a sequence of words "self-identical" raises a host of difficulties involving, for example, the material medium in which the words in question are (re)produced and also the fundamental questions of semiotics about signs' ontology and their divisibility into signifiers and signifieds. Let me emphasize, then, the narratological aspect of my analysis here. Where the narratives I study repeat phrases explicitly or stipulate, for example, "people saying the same thing," I will give them a great deal of *prima facie* credit (DeLillo 101). This is not to say that the same words mean the same thing

[55] In technical terms, quotation is, strictly speaking, extra-narrative even as it is perfectly *intra*-diegetic.
[56] In Foucault's terms, the linguistic artifact I describe here is a formulation, but not a statement. It may become as many statements as the occasions of its utterance in different narrations, different scenes, and so on. See "The Enunciative Function," section C (96-100).

wherever they recur. Of course they do not. But their form remains intact; and so do their tense and timing in so far as quotation is sundered from narratorial discourse.

Quotation happens now, unfolding in the present tense. It brings its words directly to the reader, with narratorial discourse only (perhaps) offering a preface, an afterword, or some other mode of commentary. Conceived of as a communicative agent (as in the narrative-as-rhetoric tradition of Booth and Phelan),[57] a narrator neither speaks through nor is heard over quotation. Otherwise conceived, however, it's not clear what a narrator would be, which is why I refer as consistently as possible to the effects of "narration" instead.[58]

Here is an example, from an early passage in *The Body Artist*, in which we can see how the narratorial discourse reasserts itself after quotation interrupts. DeLillo's wilder experimentation with quotation is foreshadowed here, but the first-time reader of *The Body Artist* will encounter this exchange between Robles and Hartke before having observed how weird the novel becomes. It will do, then, for a preliminary foray into the poetics of quotation. To aid the analysis that follows, I break a continuous selection (from the very end of Chapter 1) into three parts:

> [1] She saw him standing in the doorway.
> "Have you seen my keys?"
> She said, "What?"
> He waited for the question to register.
> "Which keys?" she said.
> He looked at her. (27)

[57] See also Richard Walsh's argument that a narrator is always either the author or a character, in "Who is the Narrator?"

[58] The complete bibliography relevant to this decision would be extensive. But see especially Foucault's articulation both of the gap between statements' authors and their subjects (93) and of the extent of the "enunciative field," the wide network of formulations (some only possible, rather than made) that constitutes a statement's context.

Although this passage is quite ordinary so far (one can imagine it appearing in a relatively conventional novel, despite its choppiness), it is formally and temporally complex. Shifts in both mood and tense occur between the first and second paragraphs: “She saw him standing in the doorway” is in the simple past tense and the indicative mood, while “Have you seen my keys?” is interrogative, in the past-perfect. These shifts would constitute a weird break in the narrative, were it not, exactly, for the quotation marks, which naturalize the shifts. The passage also dispenses with attribution, at times. One must infer, for example, that the speaker of the question “Have you seen my keys?” is one of the two persons mentioned in the immediately preceding sentence. “She saw him standing in the doorway” paves the way for us to assume that it is Robles, not Hartke, looking for his keys as he prepares to leave; and the attribution of the reply confirms this.

Indeed, that reply, “What?” stands somewhat differently with respect to the narration, since a simple-past sentence contains it. Here the quotation marks go beyond what would be needed to mark the word as quotation, since “She said” indicates character speech already. Elsewhere DeLillo introduces his characters’ language in constructions that look just like this, but without the helpful and conventional punctuation. Nonetheless, the effect of the quoted speech here, which piles up on itself even in these few lines of prose fiction, is to place the reader imaginatively within the unfolding moment that is being narrated. In presenting story material that is coextensive with its discourse, quotation can situate a reader in story time, generating a feeling of expectation – indeed, a present tense. While Robles waits

for Hartke's answer, we wait there with him in the sense that we must pass through this discourse in order to arrive at Hartke's reply (not yet guaranteed). This is despite the fact that Robles "waited" in the past tense. I don't mean that discourse time and story time coincide perfectly when one reads quoted speech. Obviously one can read quotation rapidly or slowly, and the narrator may instruct the reader, either before or after the fact, that the quoted speech itself has been choppy or mellifluous, elongated or terse. Yet *The Body Artist* – or any novel that similarly pits different temporalities against one another – will find in quotation a formal resistance to temporal experimentation, because a quotation must appears as a *unit* in order to appear at all. Even in the free indirect style, one must either be able to identify certain elements of the language as belonging to the diegetic world or one must suspend one's decision about the discourse's attribution.

The passage I am quoting helps to illustrate the role that quotation plays in establishing the relation between discourse time and story time that Genette and Chatman call "scene." I have already noted that the excerpt above includes narration as well as speech, and we may ask how that narration interacts with the present-ness of the quotation that it embeds. Here is part [2], which immediately follows what I have quoted above.

> [2] She said, "I bought some lotion yesterday. Which I meant to tell you. It's a muscle rub. It's in a green and white tube on the shelf in the big bathroom upstairs. It's greaseless. It's a muscle rub. Rub it in, my love. Or ask me nice, I'll do it for you." (27)

As in my first selection, the narration is minimal. Here it does no more than attribute quoted speech to a character ("She said"), although earlier it also specified the

speakers' context in time and place and added an explicitly visual dimension to the flow of the verbal exchange ("She saw him standing in the doorway" and "He looked at her"). Usually, when narration intervenes between one segment of dialogue and another, a tension develops between discourse time and story time, and the quotation itself recalibrates the pace of the narrative to the pace of the events as we suppose the characters to experience them. In part [1], the pace of narration presumably approximates the pace of the story most closely when we get one line from Robles, "Have you seen my keys?," without any narratorial commentary at all.

However, the temporalities of the quotations in [1] and [2] differ, because the quotations themselves reach into different times. While Robles asks about the past in [1] ("Have you seen my keys?"), the interrogative mode of his utterance and of both Hartke's responses ("What?" and "Which keys?") keeps the quoted speech from branching off into a new narrative. By contrast, in [2] Hartke's speech narrates a past action (her buying some lotion) and a past intention (her meaning to tell Robles), and thus the immediacy of her description of the muscle rub and of her imperatives to Robles is tempered by a digression into summary. Not only this, but Hartke's failure to respond to Robles's question in [1] primes us to notice how Hartke's speech in [2] continues through the spaces in which Robles might be expected to reply. No matter how minutely we describe it, there is no textually-grounded alternative to accepting its unity, continuity, and identity as a quotation, in particular as a sequence of consecutive words spoken by the character Lauren Hartke. In other words, there is no arguing against the quotation marks that here demarcate Hartke's speech. Yet the quotation has syntactical, punctuational, and rhythmic features that *work against* its unity and imply

a back-and-forth between Hartke and Robles, or within Hartke herself. By implying this back and forth, they raise the possibility that story time is, peculiarly, *compressed* here, even as we sense that for Hartke the moment extends uncomfortably in Robles's non-response. The quotation in [2] thus evokes competing experiences without providing definitive contextual or formal evidence for choosing among them. In *The Body Artist*, then, even easily attributable dialogue exploits quotation's present-ness to destabilize the narrative's duration.

To complete this close reading of a series of quotations that are fairly easy to naturalize, I turn to the segment that closes this passage and that concludes *The Body Artist*'s first chapter:

> [3] "All my keys are on one ring," he said.
> She almost said, Is that smart? But then she didn't. Because what a needless thing. Because how petty it would be to say such a thing, in the morning or any time, on a strong bright day after a storm. (27)

Here we see how narrative discourse, in contrast to quoted speech, can rapidly open up a world of summary (in Chatman's terms) and possibility: what Hartke might have said, but didn't. We have here both a counterfactual response to Robles ("She almost said [….] But then she didn't") and an apparently timeless narratorial stipulation ("what a needless thing […] how petty […]") whose specific language we have some reason to assign to Hartke. The reason is that if we take these judgments to be narratorial in their origin, then they problematically imply a personal narrator whom the narration never clearly situates. As instances of free indirect discourse, however, they complicate, rather than clarify, the relation between story time and discourse time. Should we assign this language to the time of Hartke's "almost" saying

something? To the white space that follows the chapter's close? Assigning it to the time of narration doesn't help, since we cannot with any certainty assimilate the time of reflection on the scene just ended to the story's timeline.

In any case, it should be clear now that determining the duration of a passage, the relationship between its discourse time and its story time, depends very much on the scale of one's selection of the text, especially when the selection crosses the boundaries of quotation by, for example, including free indirect discourse. The passage that I have reproduced above may still feel like "scene," even after I have dissected it. But the judgments passed in [3] make it possible for us to imagine this passage as a "stretch," where the narrative discourse runs markedly longer than the story time that it relates. Problematically, the duration of the scene might depend on the speed of Hartke's thought, and we thus arrive at a limit to traditional narratological analysis, where the descriptive and taxonomic work that ought to underpin interpretation requires some kind of interpretive decision before it can be carried out.[59] This is not a reason to give up on description, however, because formal description can remain empirical, even when it is constructed.[60] Instead it is a reason to draw attention to the plurality of descriptive forms that metafictions make available and to consider how well a metafiction's self-descriptions might travel.

[59] Fludernik makes a related point about how unnatural readings "cannot resist interpretation, though their manner of interpretation differs from that of mimeticists since they tend to foreground the projection of alternative worlds (Coover's 'The Babysitter') or metafictional policy" ("How Natural" 361).

[60] See Bogel's work to "replace the givenness of form with the interpretive production of form" (9). As Levine makes clear, forms are the products of observation and description; but they can nonetheless "travel" without changing and are hence not relative to their makers.

3. An Experiment with Quotation: "Don't Touch it. I'll Clean it up Later."

I have so far argued that quotation in general ruptures the flow of narrative discourse and limits narration's usual power to compress time or stretch it out. *The Body Artist* suggests its own, more specific, poetics of quotation through the effects of strangely voiced language and quoted gesture on its characters. These effects are both affective and narratological. This is to say, (1) that the narration recounts how characters like Hartke, Mr. Tuttle, and Hartke's friend Mariella Chapman respond emotionally to the recurrence of certain phrases and certain gestures, and (2) that the construction of these characters via *The Body Artist*'s discourse is put into question by the difficulty we have in attributing certain quotations. Echoing the language I use to describe Elaine Risley's ontology in *Cat's Eye*, we might say that the construction, the unfolding, or the discursive rehearsal and performance of these characters is *suspended* when the language or gesture of the story-world impresses itself in *The Body Artist*'s narrative discourse. The characters' fictiveness becomes the matter of concern; and yet, paradoxically, these moments offer readers and critics an opportunity to handle directly the linguistic materials of which these narrative objects are composed. The objects that come to the fore, then, seem both to reveal themselves and, simultaneously, to withdraw somewhere behind their accessible features. The complex ontology of quotation infects the ontology of other narrative objects in *The Body Artist*. So by sidestepping the hierarchy of character, setting, and plot in order to focus on quotation as the unit of analysis, I return to the ontology of narrative objects more generally via the novel's own metafictional concerns.

The novel amply prepares the reader for this dual emphasis on quotation and the performance of discursive form by conferring otherworldly imitative abilities on the characters of Hartke and Mr. Tuttle. Hartke achieves the power to transform utterly her appearance and the way she moves. After months of what she calls "body work," she so fully embodies the characters that she portrays on stage that she becomes unrecognizable to Chapman (107). After her show, at the house she and Robles had rented and where she has renewed the lease for the winter, she even verges on failing to recognize herself: "I am Lauren. But less and less" (119). As for Mr. Tuttle, that cipher of a character apparently speaks only in quotation, in the words and voices of past and future dialogues that he overhears. Given quotation's resistance to temporal modification, we should not be surprised to learn that Mr. Tuttle "didn't know how to measure himself to what we call the Now" (68). Instead, "this man's consciousness" is

> his walking talking continuum.
> Nice word. What does it mean? (93).

Mr. Tuttle only appears to Hartke (and is only plainly manifest in the novel's discourse) during the period of her grief for Robles, but he was apparently present in the house for a while before Robles's suicide. As Hartke attempts to converse with him, he slowly emerges as an observer and a recorder of Hartke's interchanges with her late husband. She discovers that he is even capable of "do[ing] Rey" by speaking in Rey Robles's voice (73), and it is through Mr. Tuttle's quoting Robles (and later Hartke herself) that DeLillo brings Hartke to confront the complexities that arise when quotation turns on its context. In this novel, the words in Mr. Tuttle's mouth frequently unhinge themselves from spatial, temporal, and personal markers, so that

the narration may have snapped into a flashback; or Hartke, listening, may be remembering the past; or she may be experiencing the past's bizarre resurrection or a visitation from her deceased husband. The narration doesn't permit Hartke a decision among these alternatives.

Because in a literal way Mr. Tuttle cannot speak for himself, and because the narration never adopts Mr. Tuttle's point of view, he becomes something like a surface for Hartke's projections (both of remembered scenes and of metaphysical and psychological speculations). Yet he remains not only outside of her control, his words, autonomously as it were, intruding on her consciousness, but also in a way unreadable. Hartke struggles to assimilate his speech. She gropes for the right way to frame Mr. Tuttle's quotation of Robles's words:

> She followed what he said, word for word, but had to search for the context. The speech rambled and spun. He was talking about cigarette brands, Players and Gitanes, I'd walk a mile for a Camel, and then she heard Rey's, the bell-clap report of Rey's laughter, clear and spaced, and this did not come from a tape recorder.
>
> He was talking to her, not to a screenwriter in Rome or Los Angeles. It was Rey in his role of charming fatalist [...] (63)

Hartke must "search for the context" that Mr. Tuttle does not provide, but it is not the same context that the narration offers the reader. In this scene, Hartke is reading aloud to Mr. Tuttle from a biology textbook when she notices that he has begun speaking. The narration tells us that his "voice," "accent," "dragged vowels," and "articulation" are familiar to Hartke because they are Robles's, and after a period of intense listening, the words, too, become familiar (62, 63). In this story-context, Tuttle's performance of Robles has already begun; but the narrative discourse has not yet been

shunted into quotation. It has only promised the quotation's precision in advance.[61] The crucial moment for both Hartke and for the reader arrives when Hartke finally recognizes the words, "I'd walk a mile for a Camel" and hears *Robles's* laughter, not Mr. Tuttle's. From the reader's perspective, the mid-sentence arrival of that first-personal pronoun ("I'd") enacts something of the transformation that confronts Hartke, too. The quoted phrase, "I'd walk a mile for a Camel," interrupts the third-person account of Mr. Tuttle talking, and, at that same moment, Robles's laughter intervenes and temporarily shuts down Mr. Tuttle's voice. It is as though the laughter responds to a narratological demand that the shift in discursive mode be marked at the level of story, when the discourse itself doesn't acknowledge any change (by typography or punctuation, for example). The arrival of Robles's words, marked off from the flow of the story by Robles's laughter, is an ontological bomb; it momentarily destroys context, even though the reassertion and reassembly of *a* context immediately follow. The laughter responds to a similar ontological slippage in the story-world, since "I'd walk a mile for a Camel" is presumably funny to Robles just because a cigarette has morphed somehow into a desert quadruped.

To reestablish the solidity of the narrated moment, the narration shifts from Robles's laughter to Hartke's free indirect discourse. "This [laughter] did not come from a tape recorder," she thinks to herself – for what other narrative use could the assertion have than to produce Hartke's interior monologue for the reader? There is no

[61] Pardis Dabashi notes that despite the guarantee of verbal reproduction, textual quotation of speech is still an abstraction that elides the tone, timbre, pace, and rhythm of the utterance. A narrator may even specify, as in Henry James's *The Bostonians*, that the quotation will *not* account for a feature like accent or dialect. Here, DeLillo's narration specifies the accuracy of Mr. Tuttle's reproduction, but cannot produce that reproduction in full. (Personal communication, 4/13/2016, Cambridge, MA)

reason for the reader to consider that the laughter comes from a tape recorder, although of course the reader also will not read the laughter as coming from Robles, unless explicitly so directed. Yet, however much this movement from third person, extra-diegetic narration into Hartke's free indirect discourse begins the work of re-securing the eruptive quotation ("I'd walk a mile for a camel") within a progression of story-events, the narration's dependence on Hartke's interior language makes the quotation's context uncertain. To naturalize the scene in terms of character and setting, we might say that Mr. Tuttle is channeling Rey Robles, or that Tuttle *becomes* Robles at this moment in the story. Or we might conclude that Hartke (crazily? mistakenly? driven or riven by grief?) hears her dead husband's voice and feels his presence at this moment, in a way that doesn't implicate Mr. Tuttle's ontology at all. To read through character this way obscures the novel's interrogation of quotation itself, the way Robles's language and laughter perform his presence not only for Hartke but for us.

Although the narration slides temporarily toward Hartke's language and point of view ("Rey in his role as charming fatalist"), it soon moves back toward an external perspective on Hartke's recollection of a night with Robles, their sex and their conversation, "two people passing through each other" (63). This phrase in turn can help to explicate the narration's contradictory accounts of the moment of Mr. Tuttle's quotation. On the one hand, "This was not some communication with the dead. It was Rey alive in the course of a talk he'd had with her, in this room, not long after they'd come here. She was sure of this" (63). On the other hand, the scene Hartke remembers gives way in a subsequent paragraph to the reality of Tuttle, the chair, and the space that Hartke physically occupies while her memory runs away with her: "All this a

white shine somewhere, an iceblink of memory, and then the words themselves, Rey's words, being spoken by the man in the chair nearby" (64). "Two people passing through each other" refers to Hartke and Robles in a phrase that moves its sentence from sexual relations to discursive ones. The possibility of such "passing through" attenuates Hartke's and Robles's corporeal separateness by way of the language they exchange, and so when Mr. Tuttle brings forth Robles's voice and speech, both Hartke and the narration have to work to distinguish the two characters. When their speech coincides, in quotation, they are both present (in the story; in the discourse); then, when, the narration resumes, it refers to "the words themselves" as though this emphasis could keep the characters apart. It asserts that they *are* Rey's, though spoken by Mr. Tuttle. Via such gestures, *The Body Artist* concerns itself with the ownership of quoted speech and gesture, with the tenuousness of a quotation's connection to its source, and with alchemy of performances that make identity permeable.

The pattern of quotation interrupting narration and narration reasserting itself continues through this scene. The description of "Rey's words, being spoken by the man in the chair nearby" immediately precedes a new quotation, in a separate paragraph, that the narration refuses to demote syntactically by making it an object of any subject's speech, even though it does enclose the new words in quotation marks: "I regain possession of myself through you. I think like myself now, not like the man I became. I eat and sleep like myself, bad, which is bad, but it's like myself when I was myself and not the other man" (64). Supposing the words to belong to Robles, we can infer that he has struggled with his personal identity and that now another character, Mr. Tuttle, walks himself exactly through Robles's phrases, without comprehending

them or providing an iota of commentary. Indeed, throughout *The Body Artist*, Mr. Tuttle does not or cannot contextualize himself, even though each word he utters implies an alternative context to the present narrative moment. This reading depends, however, on relegating the production of those words to some time in Robles's life, rather than the present moment, when Robles *has* perhaps become "the other man" – Tuttle. Furthermore, a flat narratology may even suppose that this syntactically isolated quotation is in a position to speak *for itself*: Its enigmatic pronouncements about personal identity in effect perform the transition between a quotation's potential and its realization – it becomes actual by being uttered or heard, written or read. The present tense claim, "I think like myself now, not like the man I became," suggests that Rey Robles's words in the mouth of Mr. Tuttle are freed in the present moment of the utterance from the work of characterization to which they eventually contribute. Unmarked by attribution, they are formally free from characterization, and in so far as we attribute them to the very weird person of Mr. Tuttle, they have been torn from their context as much at the story level as at the level of discourse. Indeed, Mr. Tuttle with his "cartoon head and body, chinless, stick-figured," resists naturalization so successfully – how can he be real even to Hartke? – that even when quotation *is* attributed to him, he may best be understood as a device for producing dislocated language, a narratological innovation.

Mr. Tuttle's quotations of Robles drive Hartke temporarily out of her experience of the present moment, and repeated encounters with two concatenated phrases, "Don't touch it" and "I'll clean it up later," cause something similar. These phrases appear together six times in the course of chapters 5 and 6. Of those six

occurrences, two are surrounded by quotation marks (83, 95); two are contextually marked as discourse, but not punctuated as such (100); and two are syntactically divorced from their context and not explicitly attributed to any speaker (87, 102). Since in the first instance Mr. Tuttle is the speaker, talking "in a voice that wasn't quite his," we can infer at once that these words (will) also belong to another moment in the story's chronology, and we can begin to speculate about whose words these (also) are and when (else) they are spoken (83). The second time they occur, they stand alone as a paragraph that bears no obvious relation to what surrounds it, and the mystery, the suspense, is perpetuated. We (may) infer that the words have occurred to Hartke in the scene that is discursively adjacent, but there is no further explanation, and such an inference depends on convention, rather than textual evidence.

Only in the third instance do these phrases have their everyday meaning as imperatives addressed from one character to another. "He," presumably Mr. Tuttle, drops a glass of water on the floor, the glass breaks, and Hartke, apparently without the immediate awareness that she is quoting anyone, says, "Don't touch it" and "I'll clean it up later" (95). I would like to give a sense, though, for what this paraphrase elides and presumes and to elaborate on the temporal dynamics of the story and the discourse in this scene, which is delimited in the text by white space above and below:

> The wind started blowing at noon and was still shaking the windows when she walked along the halls five hours later.
>
> The phone was ringing.
>
> In the kitchen he dropped a glass of water and she extended an arm, seeing the speckled wet begin to spread on the plank floor.
>
> The shrill wind made her uneasy, turning her inward, worse in a way than obliterating snow or deposits of ice that bring down power lines.
>
> She built a fire and then walked out of the room and up the stairs, listening to the walls take the wheezy strain.

> In the kitchen she said, "Don't touch it."
>
> The best things in this house were the plank floor in the kitchen and the oak balustrade on the staircase. Just saying the words. Thinking the words.
>
> She said, "Don't touch it," and extended an arm, held out a hand to forestall any effort he might make to pick up the pieces. "I'll clean it up later."
>
> There's something about the wind. It strips you of assurances, working into you, continuous, making you feel the hidden thinness of everything around you, all the solid stuff of a hundred undertakings – the barest makeshift flimsy.
>
> She cleaned it up now. She didn't wait for later. There was something in the moment that she needed to keep. (95)

Here, as so often in *The Body Artist*, the reader must negotiate the looseness of the referential scheme. The scene quoted here provides only local temporal markers: a day, a period of five hours (noon to five p.m.), the duration of a windstorm. Within the scene, a sentence like "The phone was ringing" gets no temporal placement, and so it could be that the phone was ringing continuously for five hours, that the phone rang often during that time, or that – at some particular moment – the phone had started ringing previously and was continuing to do so but was going to stop before long. A reader's grounds for deciding among these options will depend on the reader's cultural and generic expectations and on the reader's resultant *gestalt* sense of *The Body Artist*'s fictional world and its narrative framing. It is easy to imagine the narration so fully inhabiting Hartke's perspective that it recounts her memories or fantasies as though they were materially present to her. If so, the scene quoted above might be set *before* Robles's suicide and include Robles as the referent of the pronoun "he." If Robles once dropped a glass of water in the kitchen, and not Mr. Tuttle, then the scene would narrate the *origin* and not the *upshot* of the phrases, "Don't touch it" and "I'll

clean it up later."[62] Taken macroscopically, however, the text gives no indication that this particular form of temporal disorder is its *modus operandi*, although within this scene it seems clear that we must reorder the narrated events so that the sentences beginning "In the kitchen" occur sequentially, while Hartke's making the fire and climbing the stairs occur either earlier or later. This local disordering of the story events calls for naturalization, even though the novel more broadly thwarts our efforts to make the story fit within the conventional realist limitations of flesh-and-blood human characters and their psychologies. This is to say that, however plausible it might be for a person in a situation like Hartke's – grieving for a lost spouse, isolated in a house by the shore, and deeply immersed in an artistic project – to imagine or hallucinate a character like Mr. Tuttle – a ghost, an avatar of loss, a thwarted fantasy of companionship – the narration doesn't cue us to doubt that Mr. Tuttle is as real as Hartke, except through Hartke's own self-conscious reflections.

We have no cause, then, to abandon the presumption that the quoted scene happens within the temporal sequence that Chapter 6 more broadly (however weakly) establishes. Hartke has been in the house with Mr. Tuttle for weeks; she has been studying him and preparing her body and her voice for her upcoming performance. Hartke has also been speculating about Mr. Tuttle's origin, psychology, and way of being in time, and among the descriptions she provides is one that jibes especially well

[62] In contrast, if this were a time travel narrative, this sequence might be analyzed as an example of the so-called "Bootstrap Paradox" in which "A loop in time eliminates the origin of things that already exist" (Klosterman 58). Say Hartke only utters exactly these phrases because she has been hearing Mr. Tuttle say them; but Mr. Tuttle, the timeless one, can only speak the phrases he has heard already (albeit in the future). Then perhaps all the instances of these phrases are quotation and the original utterance never occurred. On the narratology of time travel see also: Gomel.

with my reading of the novel as a whole: "He had no protective surface. He was alone and unable to improvise, make himself up. […] He was there in the howl of the world. This was the howling face, the stark, not-as-if of things" (92). *The Body Artist*'s protagonist navigates the rawness of an encounter with a creature totally unable to seem, while she herself is a perfect master of seeming. The novel, in addressing the complicated process of building characters, sequences of events, and identities atop the flimsy foundation of words, asks in turn which type of relation links its verbal and narratological components to the world that it presents. Does fiction make words into worlds with the rawness of Mr. Tuttle's *turning into* Robles, into Hartke herself, or into another persona? Or does fiction rather suspend worlds *on* words, allowing the verbal components to *act*, as Hartke acts when she represents a variety of personae while remaining herself underneath?

There is no theoretical advantage in demoting *The Body Artist*'s narrative complexities to a metaphor for individual psychological crisis. The novel does, however, offer useful figures for its central puzzle about words' relationship to their contexts and their effects. In the scene most recently quoted, for example, the wind's effects on Hartke are interspersed with sentences that recount specific actions. It *seems* clear that these sentences ("In the kitchen he dropped a glass of water[…]"; "She built a fire and then walked out of the room and up the stairs […]"; "In the kitchen she said, 'Don't touch it.'") do not appear in the discourse in the same order that they occur to the character Hartke, and yet "the wind… strips you of assurances," and the wind, like the "howl of the world," constitutes a non-verbal intrusion upon an otherwise completely verbal context. Such unspoken intrusions into *The Body Artist*'s narrative

define a space for some unarticulated affective content that only a reader can supply. The fictional wind strips "you" the reader of assurances, even if one also takes the "you" to be evidence of Hartke addressing herself. The crisis, then, is a crisis of language more than a crisis of personal grief, and the wordless wind's continuity, its refusal to be divided into syntactic units, "mak[es] you feel the hidden thinness of everything around you."[63]

4. Hidden Thinness and Flat Narratology

How does thinness get hidden? In "Close Reading and Thin Description" (2013), Heather Love suggests that literary scholars have discounted the importance of a first layer of description, "thin" rather than "thick," in their rush to embrace Clifford Geertz's "insistence on interpretation against observation" in sociology (409). Love argues that in the social sciences, the necessity of building interpretation atop a base layer of observation was understood and accepted, hence not emphasized by Geertz in his 1973 essay, "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In Love's account, literary critics (represented by Stephen Greenblatt) missed the importance of thin description in Geertz's proposed methodology: "Greenblatt's interpretive utopia is one in which 'the literary and the nonliterary seem to be each other's thick description.' Thin description has no role in such a world" (411). Encouraged, in other words, by the affinity they found with thickly-descriptive social

[63] As a side note, Hartke's response to the broken glass of water is analogous to the naturalizing work of a reader-for-plot: "She cleaned it up now," as the naturalizing reader fits broken narratives back into clean ones. But DeLillo's statement of Hartke's action blocks the reader from effective cleanup work, since the past-tense "cleaned it up" is so plainly at odds with the "now" in which it keeps happening.

sciences, literary critics in the 1970s continued to do what they had been doing already for some time, filling in the layers of meaning that were not obvious from the surface of a text itself. As Love notes, "given that the field is grounded not in the observation of human behavior but in the reading of texts, a purely interpretive version of thick description is more obviously useful than one that makes central the observational practice of thin description" (410); and yet Love goes on to argue for the value of thin description in literary analysis at this moment when the field is under pressure for its loss of, or detachment from, empiricism.

As Love points out, to distinguish thin description from thick is not to eschew interpretation. Nor does Geertz's thin description depend on a naive notion of objectivity (which he critiques). Rather, "Geertz's attack was aimed at traditional empiricism, the habit of thought that tendentiously identified the bottom slice [of description] as the 'factual basis' of reality. But Geertz also saw the bottom slice the way [language philosopher Gilbert] Ryle did, as a stripped-down account that could be separated out analytically, if not practically, for observation and study" (Love, "Close Reading" 409). Noting that certain strands of Best and Marcus's "surface reading" "defer[] virtuosic interpretation in order to attempt to formulate an accurate account of what the text is like," Love suggests that literary practices of thin description might do likewise (412). She characterizes thin description as "[e]xhaustive, fine-grained attention to phenomena" (404); and she writes that in the traditions of Ryle, Geertz, and the later "Natural History of an Interview," "Thin description means, in effect, taking up the position of the device; by turning oneself into a camera, one could – at

least ideally – pay equal attention to every aspect of a scene that is available to the senses and record it faithfully" (407).

It is just here that I wish to adapt Love's defense of thin description in literary studies for my own rather different project. In proposing thin description as "a model for close reading after the decline of the linguistic turn," Love implies that the empiricism of literary reading might be clarified if we "reframe reading as a social science, one that along with more traditional social scientific methods can contribute to the project of showing 'what the real world is really like'" (404, 430). But literary reading need not show what the external world is really like in order to be empirical. Instead, I draw on Love's accounts of thin description to explain the role of interpretation in formulating narratological description; and I propose that a basic narratological account of *The Body Artist* requires something very like what Love calls "taking up the position of the device" in order to avoid depending too heavily on the naturalization of its narrative scenarios in advance of describing what the *text* is like. So while Love emphasizes that "novelists have always insisted on visible behavior," I counter that the narratological complexities of contemporary metafictions recall us, instead, to the hidden thinness of narrative objects which require something like a "device" – an interpretive program, say, or a set of genre conventions – to make them available for thick, interpretive work.

When *The Body Artist* parcels language out into quoted units and attenuates quotation's connections to characters, it throws up barriers to traditional narratology by hindering the construction of "thick" narrative units, such as characters whose intentional and psychological attributes are the customary constructions of literary

interpretation. It offers, instead, discourse itself as a narrative object that participates in driving the story – and this makes thin description somewhat easier. *The Body Artist* even introduces a device, the tape recorder, that dramatizes Hartke's efforts to describe Mr. Tuttle to herself (67); that provides Mr. Tuttle with access to aspects of Hartke that she had thought were private (hidden) (58-59); and that mediates Mariella Chapman's experience of her face-to-face interview with Hartke (111). And this is not a complete account of the recordings that populate the novel, since it excludes answering machines, recordings in Hartke's show, *Body Time*, and the electronic infrastructure that relays silent images of Kotka, Finland, to the room where Hartke watches them alone.

Of course, neither *The Body Artist*'s metafictional accounts of registering sound and sight nor the descriptions I offer here of the novel's narrative organization are anywhere near exhaustive. The necessity of interpretation even in constructing a thin description means that exhaustive accounts are impossible. From the perspective of object-oriented ontology, too, no record of an object's features and relations can exhaust its being, precisely that which is withdrawn from access and relation (see Introduction, section 6). However, by tracing the outlines of narrative objects at different scales than traditional narratologies, flat narratology unmoors them from the restricted relations that narratology has conventionally assigned them; and it helps us to recognize how novels themselves sometimes theorize the process of description-building and redescription, from thin to thick description, and back again.

Let us return for a moment to how DeLillo deploys the phrase, "the hidden thinness of everything": "There's something about the wind. It strips you of

assurances, working into you, continuous, making you feel the hidden thinness of everything around you, all the solid stuff of a hundred undertakings – the barest makeshift flimsy" (95). To ask the question that Love ascribes to Erving Goffman, who reads fictional and real-world scenarios in a "documentary" mode, "What is it that is going on here?" ("Close Reading" 426).

Our answer might begin, "There's something about the wind," and if we recall the strange way that Robles's voice passes through Mr. Tuttle's body, we can perhaps add that "the wind" is itself a redescription of voice. Having said "Don't touch it" and "I'll clean it up later," Hartke has passed along these phrases that she heard Mr. Tuttle say first, just as Tuttle himself passed along Robles's words. But a thinner description of voice than the words, the tones, and the sounds that are repeated might call the voice *just wind*. What is happening outside ("the shrill wind" (95)) is happening inside, too. This is the recursive form of *The Body Artist*'s narration, which it shares with *Cat's Eye* and *John Henry Days* in various ways. *The Body Artist*, by driving readerly attention towards the mechanics of quotation and the mechanics of voice that underlie it, and by placing certain phrases in the mouths of multiple characters at the same time or in the mouths of none, makes more (and more fundamental) descriptive methods available to critics.

5. Documentary Metafiction in *The Body Artist*

Goffman's habit of treating "a range of texts, up to and including 'great literature' as documentary" bears further attention here, because *The Body Artist* treats itself much the way Goffman might (Love, "Close Reading" 427). In Love's words,

Goffman "cut[s] text up into strips of activity," and thus "he makes a wide range of situations available for analysis and study. Because he stops at the threshold of the person, refusing to speculate about affect, motivation, and character, the products of Goffman's method are perspectives, not persons; situations, not traits; behavior that belongs to no one" (*ibid*.). I began this chapter by exploring the difficulty of describing how story time and discourse time relate to one another, what Genette and Chapman term "duration." The form of this narratological challenge depends upon how one divides up a given narrative text, and here I want to show how *The Body Artist* itself both "cut[s] text up into strips of activity" and documents its own process of doing so. The narration does not necessarily refuse to speculate, and it certainly portrays Hartke speculating about Robles and Mr. Tuttle, but its isolation of quoted matter and its emphasis on the tenuousness of attribution do highlight the interpretive activity that goes into assigning a phrase or utterance to a character, where a text does not do this explicitly.

When we attribute mentality, agency, intention, and a host of other human-like qualities to characters, despite their being textual objects (not *persons* at all), we imply a thick interpretation of the fictional world's existential order. *The Body Artist*, however, is committed to articulating its own "seeming" and to marking off gestural and linguistic performances as such. It thus performs a skepticism about such thick, interpretive play and documents this skepticism as its different moves unfold, from the opening sentence, in which "Time seems to pass," to the closing line, where Hartke "wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was" (126). The indeterminacy of time's relation to this novel's performances

(those it recounts and those it enacts) mean that Hartke's closing desire goes unanswered in the story-world. By suspending Hartke in the desire to feel this "flow of time in her body," *The Body Artist* both asserts that (she thinks) she has a body and denies her the experience that a body might provide. Although it might seem paradoxical, one way to read these two assertions together would be as a textual self-description, where "what is going on" illuminates both the ontology of the (particular) narrative world and the ontology of narrative objects more generally as well. Hartke, the particular textual object, thinly described, "wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body." As Love notes with respect to the social scientists who emphasized exhaustive description over the formulation of theory, "precise accounts of particular instances offer a strong ground for the work of generalization" ("Close Reading" 417). It seems like no more of a stretch to assign such a desire to Lauren Hartke [the textual object of metafictional commentary] than to Lauren Hartke [the imagined person co-constructed by readers of *The Body Artist* and the novel's text].

Another way *The Body Artist* "cuts itself up" is by reproducing two story-world documents, an obituary of Rey Robles and Chapman's interview/theater review of Hartke, in the interstices of the narratorial discourse. They appear between Chapters 1 and 2 and between Chapters 6 and 7 respectively. Even as they afford contrastive breaks with the chapters' narrative modes, these documentary interventions paradoxically affirm the novel's realism in two ways,. First, they buttress the novel's setting in physical, cultural, and psychological domains with clear analogies in the geographic and cultural spaces of the late twentieth-century northeast United States.

Second, they confirm the novel's overall realist attitude toward the events that it recounts. Unlike, say, Calvino's *If on a Winter's Night a Traveler*, in which each chapter promises the fictionality of the subsequent one, *The Body Artist* treats Rey Robles's life as if it were real, quoting his obituary without narratorial framing. Given this strand of realism in the novel, *The Body Artist*'s self-reflexivity does not serve to wink at its reader on the way to asserting some moral or psychological truth – as a fable might. Rather, the self-reflexivity appears as self-theorization, as the chapters' narration pares down the mechanics of quotation (and other narrative operations) and makes them available for thin description.

Like many of the seven chapters' quoted phrases (e.g. "Don't touch it" and "I'll clean it up later"), the obituary and the interview appear within *The Body Artist*'s narrative discourse with less framing or context than one might expect. It's true that both documents ground *The Body Artist*'s exposition, providing a reader with useful details for assimilating events and emotions that the novel explores elsewhere. It's also true that neither of these documents points in any way to its own "seeming." Nonetheless, for all the ease and comfort with which these documents may be read, and however typical they are of their respective expository forms, their status as quotation contributes importantly to the novel's directing of attention to "hidden thinness."

To put this in narratological terms, while the two documentary quotations introduce biographical and professional backgrounds for both Robles and Hartke; and while they provide points of view that are not subject to the wavering that the reader elsewhere observes (between third-person and second-person narration, say); the

documents' appearance also precludes the story being told "naturally" in the voice of a single narrator to an explicitly or implicitly designated audience.[64] Instead, these documents, like quotations more generally, constitute elements of the story-world that have welled up, as it were, into the narrative discourse. Lacking any preface or any narratorial comment and sitting as they do between chapters 1 and 2 and between chapters 6 and 7, they appear to be reproduced from elsewhere than the narration's point of view. Although we might read the documents primarily for their thematic contributions to our understanding of Hartke and Robles and as ancillary sources of reliable biographical evidence, we can also read the obituary and the interview as offering their own alternative narratological and ontological investigations of Robles and Hartke respectively.

Indeed, the construction of character over time (rather than the particular aspects of *these* characters) becomes the subject of inquiry in both documents. Robles, the obituary reveals, "was born Alejandro Alquezar" and later "adopted the name Rey Robles, after a minor character he played in an obscure film noir" (29, 30). Robles's filmography, in turn, "'at its best extends the language of film,' wrote the critic Philip Stansky. 'His subject is people in landscapes of estrangement. He found a spiritual knife-edge in the poetry of alien places, where extreme situations become inevitable and characters are forced toward life-defining moments'" (31). Robles, in other words, a minor character in *The Body Artist* whose suicide temporarily erases him after the novel's first chapter, has ostensibly modeled himself on a forgotten minor character in

[64] My paraphrased definition is derived from Fludernik's account of Labov in "How Natural Is 'Unnatural Narratology'" (360).

a fictional film, and he has grappled with characterological crises ("life-defining moments") in his own art. The obituary quotes him as saying, "The answer to life is the movies" (30). Yet the overall effect of the obituary's arrival as a quotation in *The Body Artist* is to cast doubt on the reliability of what can be said: "Mr. Robles's accounts of his early life were inconsistent," we learn, "but the most persuasive independent versions suggest he was 64 at his death" (29). From the perspective of this obituary's putative author, a verbal act can be measured by its persuasiveness, but it remains the kind of thing that interposes itself like a curtain between discourse and event, or like a device between representation and world. DeLillo's deployment of the obituary at the same level as the chapters' narrative discourse ironically generates a persuasive statement about Robles's life that, because it is quoted and not stipulated, sheds more light on Robles's textual qualities than on his personal ones.

Mariella Chapman's review, "Body Art in Extremis: Slow, Spare and Painful," also reinforces the novel's wonder about characterological becoming, although it tests an alternative thesis, that quotation can generate proximity, even intimacy. "Hartke's work is not self-strutting or self-lacerating," Chapman writes. "She is acting, always in the process of becoming another or exploring some root identity" (DeLillo 107). Quotation in these terms lets Hartke approach another person, and yet Chapman does not fail to mark Hartke's own, somewhat colder account of what she does. Chapman quotes Hartke saying, "The body has never been my enemy[…]. I've always felt smart in my body. I taught it to do things other bodies could not. It absorbs me in a disinterested way. I try to analyze and redesign" (107). Thus, contra Chapman, Hartke registers her own body as an instrument (a device) for gestural and vocal quotation

that keeps her "disinterested." From the outside, the body work has physical costs to Hartke. As Chapman puts it, Hartke "has transformed herself shockingly for this event and although the brief run is over, she continues to look – well, wasted" (105). The narration's formal distance from Chapman's assessment may undercut this view, however. Indeed Hartke's physical transformations make a fascinating example of what happens when quotation predominates over character, setting, or event and speaks for itself through some medium. For Hartke the costs are physical; for Mr. Tuttle, temporal; and they are formal for *The Body Artist* as a whole. In eschewing the construction of clear narrative through-lines in favor of an exploration of quotation's ontology, *The Body Artist*'s chapters approach the verge of narrative collapse. DeLillo, however, quite elegantly patches this threatened narrative together, allowing the discourse to cite two documents that organize the novel's performances within an intelligible sequence of events.

Hartke's ability to switch into Mr. Tuttle's voice is analogous to the uncanny power of quotation that narrative discourse frequently wields. Like free indirect discourse and other forms of telepathic narration,[65] Hartke's transformation, which happens both on stage and during the interview, can elicit emotional investment and concern in the reader/perceiver, even though the structure of quotation is alienating. Chapman marks the alienation with her shift in pronouns, even as she reaffirms her admiration for Hartke in her description of the interview's strangest moment:

> Then [Hartke] does something that makes me freeze in my seat. She switches to another voice. It is his voice, the naked man's, spooky as a

[65] On telepathy as a model for various forms of narration, including the now out-dated "omniscient" narration, see Nicholas Royle.

> woodwind in your closet. Not taped but live. Not lip-sync'd but real. It is speaking to me and I search my friend's face but don't quite see her. I'm not sure what she's doing. I can almost believe she is equipped with male genitals, as in the piece, prosthetic of course, and maybe an Ace bandage in flesh-tone to bleep out her breasts, with a sprinkle of chest hair pasted on. Or she has trained her upper body to deflate and her lower body to sprout. Don't put it past her. (DeLillo 111)

Here we see the disturbing effects of quotation translated from speech to gesture and from printed words to the corporeal domain. Not being sure what Hartke is doing with her voice (or at all?), Chapman elides Hartke and instead recounts what "it," the voice, does. Chapman also dares her reader to consider whether Hartke might be capable of spontaneously altering her physical form, even her sex. From one perspective, then, Hartke's embodied performance of the voices and gestures of others becomes just another way for the narrative to display the disruptiveness of quotation in general. At the same time, however, we might consider whether Chapman's perspective on Hartke's pluripotency speaks to artistic production and reproduction specifically, highlighting how the forms that a critic interprets are built up layer by layer from components no longer available for description.

6. Conclusion

Perhaps it is strange that a novel promising from its title to explore body art should, instead, become so caught up in voices and language and temporality. My approach to *The Body Artist* reconciles this apparent contrast by examining the body of quotation itself, attempting thin descriptions of how quotation works in this novel. Conventional narratives and naturalizing reading strategies both do the work of suturing quoted speech to its narrative context and (thereby) delivering their readers as

immediately as possible to a speaker's present moment. *The Body Artist*, conversely, attacks and destabilizes such strategies and conventions in order to see what quotation might do or be on its own. DeLillo's novel plays with the formal properties of the quotations it deploys, and in so doing it enables comparative thin descriptions of those properties. I will conclude by noting, however, that quotation's present-ness remains resilient. For all the novel's formal experimentation, its discourse winds up reshaping the present tense itself, rather than moving quotation into a different temporality. *The Body Artist*'s narrative present becomes a speculative temporality for which Mr. Tuttle's "walking talking continuum" makes a rather nice image:

> It isn't true because it can't be true. Rey is not alive in this man's consciousness or in his palpable verb tense, his walking talking continuum.
>
> Nice word. What does it mean?
>
> She thought it meant a continuous thing, a continuous whole, and the only way to distinguish one part from another, this from that, now from then, is by making arbitrary divisions. (93)

"Continuum" here becomes the form that might – but apparently doesn't – invite the dead Rey Robles back to life. Does any novel form a continuum, and does *The Body Artist*? This elliptical passage doesn't address novel forms explicitly, but it does speak to character forms. Mr. Tuttle is at one extreme, since making arbitrary divisions "is exactly what he doesn't know how to do" (93). At the other extreme is Robles, whose suicide arbitrarily divides him from Hartke and also divides time into a before and after that even this novel acknowledges. In between, however, we have Hartke herself, torn (formally) between Mr. Tuttle's hard-to-parse utterances and Robles's silence. This distinction among the characters is especially marked in the obituary and the interview. Although the former makes use of the present tense to explore uncertainties

about Robles's life, it otherwise speaks of Robles and his actions in the past tense, where his suicide confines him.[66] What is more, the conventions of filmography and the reproducibility of film as a medium give his character a narrative fixity that Lauren Hartke lacks. Even the small phrase "bit parts" underscores Robles's discontinuity from role to role, and in the characterology of *The Body Artist*, discontinuity makes it possible to mark time and close off a history – or a life (30). In so far as Robles seems to be quotable without ever quoting, Robles is dead in this novel even where he walks and talks, in Chapter 1. The narration excludes the reader from Robles's interiority while it delivers many of Hartke's minute speculations. Robles is thus a qualitatively different character from Hartke, one whose being may be summed in an obituary, even if that obituary acknowledges various holes in his narrative past.

The Body Artist is in large part about the power of quotation to disrupt the narrative or bodily forms that demarcate it, and indeed the novel derives much of its force from the ontological difference between quotation and narratorial prose; but it still remains to us to develop a fuller poetics of quotation, a rubric for describing and cataloging the variety of quotation's relations to its prior and succeeding context. It can help to keep these descriptions both thin, minimally interpretive, and flat in the sense of dropping hierarchical frameworks and allowing these under-studied narrative objects to try to speak for themselves. It is also helpful to borrow habits of thinking from object-oriented philosophy that may help us mark the distortions imposed by

[66] For example, "it isn't clear how many years he spent in the USSR or whether he was ever reunited with his mother," although "[i]t is known that he lived in Paris as a young man, hauling trash, performing as a street juggler and playing bit parts in several movies, cast as a thief or pimp" (30).

narrative objects on their discursive contexts, whether narrative, interpretive, or theoretical.

If the narrative poetics of *The Body Artist* can feel like an ungovernable mess, it might be that DeLillo is playing a joke on us by repeating the phrases, "Don't touch it" and "I'll clean it up later." We might also be tempted to agree with one of *The Body Artist*'s narrative stipulations: "This is the rule of time. It is the thing you know nothing about" (101). To do so, however, would be to concede a little *too* much to fiction. We should, however, allow fictional objects, and especially metafictions, to open up a speculative time and space within which we might try to meet narrative objects on their own grounds.

Conclusion – Talking About Reality

The way of reading I have modeled here takes it as a premise that literary-fictional worlds are subspaces of the empirical world we inhabit. This means that taking an objective view of what there is in the world need not – indeed cannot – ignore the fictional; and like Bruno Latour and Heather Love, I have the view that objective practices need not exclude care.[67] By that I mean that empiricism is compatible with affective, intellectual, and evaluative relations to one's objects of study, and flat narratology's privileging of what discourse has to say for itself is, expressly, a value-laden choice. As I suggest in Chapter 2, aesthetics may have a proper role in one's choice of an organizational scheme, and in trying to let these metafictions speak for themselves, I have sought an economy of description-in-interpretation: why not take up the taxonomies and frameworks that fictions themselves bring to hand?

It might be objected, however, that "flat narratology" sets off in the wrong direction when it proposes studying narrative outside the hierarchies of character, setting, and plot. My readings of *Cat's Eye*, *John Henry Days*, and *The Body Artist* go out of their way to avoid treating the novels' protagonists as though they were people. Probably, in highlighting characters' constructedness and the strange temporal and narrative logics of these novels' metafictional discourse, I have passed up the best opportunities to examine what is most human in them, depictions of people struggling

[67] Love notes that Latour's endorsement of care has seemed minimal to many critics, for whom "Latour's focus on objects and networks skirts crucial questions of power, inequality, and social structure" ("The Temptations" 51-52).

to make their own stories in the world, often by way of art. If care is what is called for in investigating the literary real, why not double down on those features that speak most obviously to lived human lives?

Martha Nussbaum advocates such a way of reading in *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life*. Characterizing literature as "subversive" and calling the novel "a morally controversial form," Nussbaum promises to focus her attention on "the characteristics of the literary imagination as a public imagination, an imagination that will steer judges in their judging, legislators in their legislating, policy makers in measuring the quality of life of people near and far" (2, 3). But which characteristics of the literary imagination are these? Nussbaum's view is much narrower than Love's (or my own). Her "central subject is the ability to imagine what it is like to live the life of another person who might, given changes in circumstance, be oneself or one of one's loved ones" (5). In other words, the literary imagination she values is the one that facilitates people's "wonder about themselves" (*ibid*.). But now, more than twenty years after the publication of *Poetic Justice*, it seems clear that the imaginations of judges, legislators, and policy makers would be enhanced if they adopted other points of view, such as animals', plants', or ecosystems' – or even machines'.[68]

I want conclude then by returning to Love's idea of "taking up the position of

[68] The relationship between postcritical reading and the "posthuman turn" has not, I think, been fully or clearly articulated. But those who are most critical of Latour's recent influence in the humanities are concerned for the humanities' diminishes status and diminished ambition in the academy. Love ascribes to Nathan K. Hensley, for example, the view that empiricism as advocated by Latour might constitute no more than "a capitulation to the given rather than a way of reaching toward new possibilities not yet materialized in the social world" ("The Temptations" 65).

the device" that I cite in Chapter 3. Might the practice of taking up such a position be generalized, so that novels themselves, however outlandish their imaginations, are read for how they register and make visible various real-world conditions?[69] Could we make a politics out of such readings? Whatever can be seen in a novel tells the viewer something (though perhaps nothing definitive) about the worlds in which the novel is produced, disseminated, and read; and I have been arguing here that fictional techniques, along with critical ones, are responding to the changing relationship between world and discourse that is a product of, among other things, the Internet age and the academy itself.

The flat narratological readings that have made up the bulk of this dissertation engage fiction's discursive forms to make this argument. But a thematic example from *The Body Artist* underscores just as effectively how the rapid technological and social change associated with the information revolution (and postdating *Poetic Justice*) have altered what novels make visible or conceal. Lauren Hartke, the novel's protagonist, can "spen[d] hours at the computer screen looking at a live-streaming video feed from the edge of a two-lane road in a city in Finland" (DeLillo 40). The narration of this action alone might date the novel to sometime after the mid-1990s (unless the novel were science-fictional or futuristic). But Hartke's reflection on her own behavior tells us rather more about how humans' complicity in networks that reach far beyond their bodies (and that behave, in some ways, autonomously) have altered what counts as a

[69] Here I am inspired by feminist science studies scholar Michelle Murphy's work on quite a different subject, sick building syndrome. In *Sick Building Syndrome and the Problem of Uncertainty*, Murphy theorizes "regimes of perceptibility" as the ways that "a discipline or epistemological tradition perceives and does not perceive the world" (Murphy 10). Any interpretive method, like any scientific instrument, "can detect some things and not others" (9).

scene or an event. Here and now, an audience can be compelled by discursive transmission as such: "It was interesting to [Hartke] because it was happening now, as she sat here, and because it happened twenty-four hours a day, facelessly, cars entering and leaving Kotka, or just the empty road in the dead times" (*ibid*.).

Paradoxically, the network *transmits* immediacy, or rather its illusion. By providing continuous coverage, it erases its own visibility to Hartke, for whom "[t]he dead times were best" (*ibid.*). For her, the transmission of a static scene is "real enough to withstand the circumstance of nothing going on" (*ibid.*). "[N]othing going on" conceals how the video signal from Kotka must be generated, encoded, transmitted, and ultimately decoded again into light and dark patterns on a screen. The verb elides the medium by which the "nothing" becomes apparent, and the illusion is appropriate to Hartke's circumstance, unmoored as she is by her husband's suicide. Ironically, however, the "realness" of Kotka depends in part on the display of local time as it progresses: "It was the sense of organization, a place contained in an unyielding frame, as it is and as you watch, with a reading of local time in the digital display in a corner of the screen. Kotka was another world but she could see it in its realness, in its hours, minutes and seconds" (40).[70]

Here it is not by taking up the damaged position and limited vision of Hartke that we can care about the world – either the fictional world of *The Body Artist* or the wider world in which that fiction is enmeshed. By taking up the position of the device, however, we can situate ourselves in the position of what connects worlds to each

[70] Schuster notes: "The screen thrives on the circumstance of nothing going on precisely because the 'nothingness' heightens the screen's significance; what matters is not what is happening on the screen, but how the screen frames each moment" (167).

other, what transmits the conviction of their shared reality, and what marks off time. The device is Hartke's screen, but also the network that enables it show what it shows. It could as easily be *The Body Artist* itself.

Or, additionally, the body artist *herself*. This dissertation's readings of Hartke and of *Cat's Eye*'s Elaine Risley suggest a conception of art in non-literary media as engaged with the same questions about art objects' ontology and about how best to amplify and examine their real-world agency. In this vein, I plan to extend this project to Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* and the short fictions of Lydia Davis. The former renders a protagonist for whom seeming really *is* being, and it imagines such a person as deeply threatening to real-world logics of commerce and social performance. Davis's fictions are of interest in a different way, since they depend for their effects on a collectivity that transcends the usual borders of narrative but still relies on the material proximity different units of discourse.

Davis's fictions and interviews also make inescapably clear that her experiences in and around the academy have shaped her writing, and while it is not new to argue that theory has changed the history of the novel – that there is a formal and intellectual back-and-forth between the institutions of literature and those of the academy – there is more work to be done on the literature's critical capacity and vice versa.[71]

Flat Narratology was slow to find its form. Over several years of course work, research, and critical writing, a project that might have focused narrowly on the

[71] I am thinking here of works as different at Mark McGurls's *The Program Era*; Judith Ryan's *The Novel After Theory*; and Raymond Federman's *Critifiction*.

poetics of character or on the diversity of narrative temporalities became an attempt to orient narrative poetics toward the field's pressing debates about how to read and interpret; and in turn to seek out among those debates the positions and methods that might be of particular use to narrative poetics. For this dissertation I have considered recent metafictional novels, but of course, literature in other genres and cultural objects of other materials than linguistic discourse are also engaged in self-critical and self-descriptive operations. Since "discourse is a material practice," however, as Donna Haraway points out, it may be that flat narratology is applicable in the realms of visual, plastic, and sonic art as well (*Primate Visions* 111, qtd. in Love, "The Temptations" 62). Because flat narratology undermines or at least provisionally sets aside narrative hierarchies, seizing on textual objects like quotations, taxonomies, and frameworks, it has some promise for examining how even non-narrative forms make worlds, including the ones we live in.

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